JEREMIAH

The prophet Jeremiah ministered in Judah during the last forty years of the nation's history, from 627 to perhaps 582 B.C. In spite of his faithful preaching of the Word, Jeremiah watched the nation decline until Judah was taken captive by the Babylonians and Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. He expressed his grief vividly in the book of Lamentations.

He was a priest called to be a prophet, a sensitive man called to confront kings, false prophets, and hypocritical priests. He was bold before men but broken before God, and we call him "the weeping prophet." When Jesus was here on earth, the people identified Him with the prophet Jeremiah (Matt. 16:14). Jeremiah's life was not easy, and his ministry did not appear successful. But he was faithful to the Lord and accomplished God's will.

"Jeremiah lived about sixty years. Across that life span there is no sign of decay or shriveling. Always he was pushing out the borders of reality, exploring new territory. And always he was vigorous in battle, challenging and contesting the shoddy, the false, the vile."

Eugene H. Peterson

After describing his call to ministry (chap. 1), Jeremiah records his messages to Judah, pleading with the people to repent (chaps. 2—33). He shares some of his personal sufferings (chaps. 34—45) and sermons to the gentile nations (chaps. 46—51). The last chapter reviews the fall of the city and the nation (chap. 52).

Jeremiah is a master of imagery who creates many word pictures to give his message. As you read his prophecy, use your imagination and "see" what Jeremiah is saying. Also, note the occasional personal disclosures in the book, particularly the honest expressions of the prophet's feelings. Jeremiah reveals his own heart as he preaches about the broken heart of God.

JEREMIAH 1

Kings and rulers come and go, but the Word of God remains and accomplishes God's work in the world. Yet God needs a voice to herald the Word, and nobody feels adequate for the task.

Hearing (1–10). God's word to Jeremiah was, "You will be what I want you to be, go where I want you to go, and say what I want you to say. I supervised your conception, I consecrated you, and now I am ordaining you." If God calls you, believe what He says and obey Him. You may not feel up to it, but your adequacy comes from God, not from yourself.

Are You Available?

Moses did not feel adequate for the task when God called him, but the Lord reassured him (Exod. 3—4). "And who is sufficient for these things?" asked Paul (2 Cor. 2:16); and his answer was, "Our sufficiency is from God" (2 Cor. 4:5–6). When God calls you to do a task for Him, He does not ask you to be adequate; He only asks you to be available.

Seeing (11–16). God's servants must have open eyes as well as open ears, for God can "speak" through what they see. In Hebrew, the words *almond* and *watch* are similar. God watches over His Word to perform what He says. Our job is proclamation; His job is performance. Babylon came from the north and destroyed Judah and Jerusalem.

Doing (17–19). It was difficult for youthful Jeremiah to confront his elders with a message of denunciation, but *God made him* and *God was with him*. God's messengers must be walls and not shifting sand.

God's Touch

The touch of God makes the difference between success and failure. God touched Isaiah's lips to give him purity (Isa. 6:1–7) and Jeremiah's lips to give him power (Jer. 1:9–10; Luke 21:15). He touched Jacob's hip and gave him a limp (Gen. 32:25), thus helping him to become a "prince with God." God touched Daniel and set him on his feet (Dan. 8:18), gave him strength (Dan. 10:18), and opened his mouth for ministry (Dan. 10:15–16). The call of God and the touch of God must go together or we fail.

JEREMIAH 2

Why was judgment coming to the nation of Judah? Because the people were unfaithful to God and had mixed the worship of Jehovah with the worship of heathen idols. Religion was very popular in Judah, but it was not very spiritual.

Judah was *an unfaithful wife* who had not maintained her "honeymoon love" (vv. 2, 32; Rev. 2:4). The people were *a wasted harvest* devoured by the enemy (v. 3). They forgot what God did for them and turned to false gods (vv. 4–8). It was like exchanging a pure artesian well for a dirty, leaky cistern (vv. 9–13).

They were *stubborn animals* that hated the yoke (v. 20) and *a degenerate vine* that bore no fruit (v. 21; Isa. 5). Their sins were so deep that they could not be washed away (v. 22). Like *wild animals in heat* (vv. 23–25), they lusted after sin; yet they denied that they had sinned (vv. 33–36)!

The last picture is that of *prisoners of war,* marching away with their hands on their heads (v. 37). What the people thought was freedom turned out to be slavery.

JEREMIAH 3

The word *backsliding* is used seven times in this chapter. Judah was gradually sliding away from the Lord and ignoring His loving pleas. What is *backsliding* like?

Backsliding

Backsliding *is an Old Testament word used only by Isaiah (57:17), Jeremiah, and Hosea (11:7; 14:4). It means "disloyalty," "faithlessness." Most Christians do not* jump *into sin and get away from God's will. They gradually decline spiritually, then find themselves in trouble and wonder how it happened. They leave their first love (Rev. 2:4) and start living for the flesh and not the Spirit (Gal. 3:1–3). That is why our Lord admonished us to watch and pray (Matt. 26:41). When we least expect it, the germ of sin can enter the system.*

Backsliding is like harlotry. The nation was "married" to Jehovah at Sinai when God gave her His covenant. But Judah became an unfaithful wife whose love was growing cold (Jer. 2:2) and whose "lovers" were many. God could "divorce" His defiled wife; but if He did, *she could not return to Him* (Deut. 24:1–4). So, instead of divorcing her, God warned her (vv. 3, 6–

10). However, she would not listen. He begged her to return, for returning is the only remedy for backsliding; but she refused.

Backsliding is like sickness (22). It begins with a secret "infection" of sin, which leads to loss of spiritual appetite, gradual decline and, if not attended to, death. God heals our backsliding if we honestly accept His diagnosis and humbly return to Him.

JEREMIAH 4

Over forty times in his book, Jeremiah calls for God's people to return to the Lord. To describe what that is like, he uses several images.

It is like *plowing* (vv. 1–3). Hard hearts need plowing up so they can receive the seed of the Word and bear fruit.

It is like *performing surgery* (v. 4). The Jews put their confidence in external religious ritual and did not let God operate on their hearts (Deut. 10:12–16; 30:6; Rom. 2:28–29). He wants truth deep within the heart (Ps. 51:6).

It is like *joining the army* (vv. 5–6, 19–21). The backslider is serving the enemy; but then he hears the trumpet call, realizes he is a traitor, and returns to obey his commander.

It is like *taking a bath* (v. 14). When we confess our sins, God cleanses us (1 John 1:9) and gives us a new beginning (Ps. 51:1–2, 10–11).

It is like *growing up* (v. 22). Believers should be childlike but not childish (Matt. 11:16–17). Backsliders are foolish, like disobedient children who are only hurting themselves.

No wonder God repeatedly calls to His backslidden people, "Return! Return!"

JEREMIAH 5

Looking for a man (1–9). God would have spared Sodom had He found ten righteous men (Gen. 18:26–32); but to spare Jerusalem, He would have settled for *one!* Yet Jeremiah could not find one, not even among the "great men" who were spiritual leaders in the city. Never underestimate the importance of one person living wholly for the Lord. Perhaps you can be that "righteous one" in your home or place of employment.

Looking for truth (3). The eyes of the Lord search for people

who are faithful to Him and His Word. They may be in the minority and they may be persecuted, but they are God's own people and He will bless them.

Looking but not seeing (20–25). The eyes of the spiritual leaders were blind to God and what God was doing (Isa. 6:10; Matt. 13:15). They were also blind to the judgment about to fall on the nation. The waves of the sea know where to stop, but Judah's leaders went beyond the limits God had set. They might be popular and prosperous, but their prosperity would destroy them.

A Righteous Man

Henry Varley said to evangelist D. L. Moody, "The world has yet to see what God can do with and for and through and in a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him." Moody asked God to make him that man, and the Lord gave him his request. God used Moody in a marvelous way, and his work is still being blessed around the world.

JEREMIAH 6

The watchman. The prophet saw the invasion coming and warned the people, but they would not listen to him (v. 10). The delicate woman (Jerusalem) would be ruined (v. 2); the sun was going down (vv. 4–5); and the harvest of sin would be reaped (v. 9).

The physician. Jeremiah saw the sickness and wounds of the nation and pointed to God as the only source of healing (3:22). The false prophets gave a superficial diagnosis and a false remedy (v. 14), which led the nation into judgment (Lam. 2:14). Beware of religious teachers who look only at the surface and never get to the heart of the problem.

The guide (16). Jeremiah saw the people wondering which way to go. The "new religions" confused them, so he called

them back to God's Word. Seek "the old paths" of the Word, not to try to repeat "the good old days," but to go forward to do God's will in your day.

The assayer (27–30). Jeremiah's words were like a fire (23:29) that separated the precious metal from the dross. But the people chose to be cheap alloy instead of precious gold and silver: all God's judgments were in vain.

Heart Trouble

The false prophets in Judah, like the false teachers today, dealt superficially with the problems in society, but Jeremiah dealt with the heart. *The word* heart *appears more than sixty times in his prophecy, and one of his favorite phrases is "the imagination of his heart." The heart is deceitful and wicked (Jer. 17:9), and only God can change it (Jer. 31:31–34). Honest diagnosis by a faithful physician is the first step toward recovery, but too many people prefer the superficial encouragement that says "Peace, peace!"*

JEREMIAH 7

God told Jeremiah to preach a sermon at the gate of the temple and tell the people that their confidence was unfounded because they were trusting the wrong things. The false prophets were saying, "Nothing can happen to Jerusalem because the temple is here" (v. 4); "We are safe because we offer sacrifices to the Lord" (v. 21); "We have the ark of God's covenant, the throne of the Lord" (3:16); and "We have the law of God" (8:8).

The temple, the sacrifices, the ark, and the Law were indeed precious things, but they could not be used to please God apart from the sincere devotion of the people to the Lord. The

people were hiding their sins behind religion (vv. 8–15, 21–27). The so-called revival under King Josiah (2 Kings 22—23) was merely a surface reformation; it did not change the hearts of the people.

Never be satisfied with surface religion; be sure that God ministers to your heart and that you obey Him from the heart (Eph. 6:6). The only way to have confidence is to build on the Rock (Matt. 7:21–29), and the only way to build on the Rock is to obey what He says.

The True Source of Confidence

In what do you put your confidence? In lying words from optimistic false teachers (Jer. 7:4, 8)? In riches (Ps. 52:7)? In important people (Ps. 146:3–4; Amos 6:1)? In the intuitions of your own heart (Prov. 28:26)? In excellent equipment (Isa. 31:1)? In your own experience and expertise (Ps. 44:6)? Or in the living God (Ps. 118:8–9; Prov. 3:21–26)?

JEREMIAH 8

Four times in this chapter, Jeremiah asks and answers the question, "Why?"

Why are they backsliding (1–12)? The answer is plain: they believe lies and will not heed the truth of God's Word. They will not admit their sins or repent of their sins. They are happy with the superficial ministry of the false prophets (v. 11) and the right it gives them to be religious and still live in sin.

Why are they sitting still (13–17)? Because they do not really believe the enemy is coming! They have false confidence based on lying words, so they are at peace.

Why did they provoke God (18–19)? Because they believed they could serve both the Lord and their idols. They did not abandon the Lord; they just made Him one of their many gods. But the Lord will not accept equality with any other god,

for He is God alone. Just as an unfaithful husband or wife provokes a spouse, so the unfaithful child of God grieves the heart of the Lord.

Why is there no recovery (20–22)? Because the people did not heed God's warning and His long-suffering reached its limit. Had they plowed their hearts (4:3), there could have been a harvest of repentance; but it was too late. The sickness was too far gone, and no medicine was available.

When God calls you to return, do not wait too long. Seek the Lord while He may be found (Isa. 55:6–7).

JEREMIAH 9

Most people want to stop their weeping, but Jeremiah wanted to weep more, so burdened was he for his people. The easiest thing for him would have been escape (Ps. 55:6–7). However, like a true shepherd, he stayed with the people and sought to minister to them.

He would not be the only one weeping, for he saw the day coming when the wailing women would lament the death of the nation (vv. 17–21). The people used their tongues like bows (v. 3) to shoot the arrows of deceit (v. 8), and they went from evil to evil.

Are you among those who are valiant for the truth (v. 3)? If you are, you know that the only thing to glory in is the Lord of glory (v. 24). It is not our minds, our might, or our money that wins the day (v. 23) but our faith in God and our desire to glorify Him.

Pilgrim's Progress

Life never stands still and Judah was going "from evil to evil" (Jer. 9:3). Those who know Jesus Christ can go "from faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17), "from strength to strength" (Ps. 84:7), and "from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). That is the kind of progress God's pilgrims should make!

JEREMIAH 10

Jeremiah spoke to both Israel (already in exile) and Judah and reminded them that they belonged to the true God, the living God, the everlasting King (v. 10) about whom they could say, "There is none like You" (vv. 6–7). He is the Creator of everything (vv. 11–13).

Then why should they fear the idols of the nations or seek their help? The idols have no breath, so they are dead. They cannot speak. They must be propped up or carried because they have no strength. (See Ps. 115; Isa. 40:18–20.) They are indeed futile!

Today's idols are much more subtle, but they are just as worthless when it comes to a life that is real: money and the things money can buy, position, authority, fame, and so forth. When we trust and serve anything other than God, we practice idolatry.

We have been told, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

JEREMIAH 11

Deliverance (1–5). Jehovah repeatedly reminded His people of their deliverance from Egypt and the covenant He made with them at Sinai. He reminded them of His grace in giving them the Promised Land. Why turn to idols when all their blessings came from the Lord?

Disobedience (6–8). Israel accepted the covenant (Exod. 19:8) but then disobeyed the law of God. The new generation accepted the covenant as found in Deuteronomy, entered the land, and eventually turned to idols.

Disaster (9–17). The Babylonians would come, capture the nation, and destroy Jerusalem and the temple. God *would not* defend His people and their false gods *could not,* and He would not even answer the prayers of His servant.

Defense (18–23). The prophet's own friends and relatives tried to silence him and then slay him, but God defended His servant. Jeremiah took his life in his hands when he preached, but nothing stopped him. He was bold before men because he was broken before God.

Docile Lambs

Both Jeremiah and Jesus were like sheep led to the slaughter (Jer. 11:19; Isa. 53:7). They did not fight back but committed themselves to God and trusted Him to work (1 Pet. 2:18–24).

JEREMIAH 12

Perplexity (1–4). "Why do the wicked prosper?" is asked not only by Jeremiah, Job (21:7), and Asaph (Ps. 73), but also by many believers who suffer because of their faithfulness to God. The wicked treated Jeremiah like a sacrificial lamb (11:19), but he wanted God to slaughter them (v. 3)! Would that have solved the problem?

Perspective (5–6). God's answer helped to prepare His servant for the trials ahead. Serving God is a blessed privilege, but it is also a difficult task; *and it gets more and more difficult.* Jeremiah would go from racing with men to racing with horses, from a land of peace to the thickets of the Jordan. This is the only way we can mature in life and service.

"His promises are checks to be cashed, not mere mottoes to hang on the wall."

Vance Havner

Plunder (7–13). The people depended on the temple (7:4), but God had forsaken it. The enemy was about to come like vultures eating a corpse (v. 9) or strangers tramping down a vineyard or a garden (vv. 10–13).

Promise (14–17). God chastens, but His compassions do not fail (Lam. 3:22–24). He promised to judge the invading nations

and one day free Judah from her exile and bring her back to her land, and He kept His promise.

The prophet asked for *explanations,* but God met his need by giving him *promises.* When you cannot explain God's ways, you can still trust His promises.

JEREMIAH 13

Jeremiah sometimes preached object lesson sermons, parables in action using familiar things. Like our Lord's parables, they got the attention of the people and awakened the interest of the indifferent.

The sash (1–11) was probably part of the priestly garments, which would make it especially holy. As long as the people clung to God in humble obedience, He was glorified. When they defiled themselves in pride, they became ruined and useless like the sash under the rock. Too proud to repent, Judah ended up in the darkness (vv. 15–17).

The bottles (12–14) represented the leaders and the people who were all empty of spiritual life. God would fill them with drunkenness, which symbolizes judgment (25:15–25). Then He would smash the bottles and show no pity.

The flock (15–22) is a familiar picture of God's people (Ps. 100:3). Their leaders were to be like loving shepherds; instead, they were selfish hirelings. The sheep would be taken to slaughter by the invaders.

The Ethiopian and the leopard (23) were reminders that Judah's sin was deeper than the skin and could not easily be removed by some superficial means. Disobedience was such a habit with the people that it was part of their very nature.

Useless, broken, and slaughtered because of sin too deep to be removed: those are the sad consequences of pride and disobedience.

JEREMIAH 14

No hope (1–6). God sent a drought to Judah to bring His people to repentance, but the chastening did no good. The people mourned for the land but not for their sins. They were sorry for their plight but not for their evil ways.

Hope (7–9). Their only hope was in the Lord, but He would

not do anything for them as long as they refused to return to Him. Instead of being King in residence, God was a tourist passing through the land and a warrior unable to help. If God is not with us, everything will be against us.

False hope (10–22). Their religious activities could not save them because their hearts were far from God. The messages of the false prophets gave the people only a false hope for peace and healing that never came (v. 19). They prayed to the idols, but the idols could not send rain.

Sometimes all you can do when God is a stranger in the land is to imitate Jeremiah and get alone and weep. Wait on the Lord with a broken heart (vv. 17, 22).

"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Paul (Rom. 15:13)

JEREMIAH 15

The chapter presents Jeremiah in several different roles in his spiritual ministry.

The mourner (1–9). Jeremiah did not rejoice that the people were facing either captivity or death. He was a man with a broken heart. He knew that the nation deserved their fate, but it pained him just the same. Jesus felt that pain when He wept over Jerusalem in His day (Luke 19:41–44). Does the wickedness of today's world break your heart?

The troublemaker (10–14). Jeremiah did not preach "smooth words" as the false prophets did (12:6), and his messages made people curse him. Sometimes you must cause problems before you can solve problems.

The sufferer (15–18). The prophet experienced the loneliness of leadership and the anguish of ministry, but God encouraged him as he fed on the Word. God may not take away the pain in your heart, but He can balance it with His joy.

The separator (19–21). The prophet had to be careful to preach only the true Word of God and not mix it with lies as the false prophets did. As a wall, he brought division; but God would defend him from the attacks of the people. God did not keep him out of the battle, but He did bring Jeremiah through.

"To be a true minister to men is always to accept new happiness and new distress, both of them forever deepening and entering into closer and more inseparable union with each other the more profound and spiritual the ministry becomes. The man who gives himself to other men can never be a wholly sad man; but no more can he be a man of unclouded gladness."

Phillips Brooks

JEREMIAH 16

God gave His servant four prohibitions.

Do not take a wife. A godly wife can be a great encouragement to a minister, but Jeremiah had to serve alone. His singleness was a witness to the nation that homes would be destroyed. (See 1 Cor. 7:25–33.)

Do not mourn. People were dying because of the drought, but Jeremiah was not to join in mourning. Why? Because the dead were better off than those who would perish in the siege. The prophet was a living witness that God's comfort was taken from His people.

Do not celebrate. There were weddings as well as funerals, but what joy could they bring knowing that death was imminent? When people asked Jeremiah about his strange behavior, he would have opportunity to declare the Word of God.

Do not look back. He ended with a message of hope: the future restoration of the nation will be greater than the exodus from Egypt. In the discouraging hours of life, God is working out His purposes, so take refuge in Him.

JEREMIAH 17

The engraver (1–4). When we sin, we write it on our hearts, and only God can erase it when we repent and trust Him. He writes His Word on our hearts so we will get victory over sin (Ps. 119:11; 2 Cor. 3:1–3). The altar was to be a place of remitting sin, not recording sin; but their sins were engraved even there.

The farmer (5–8). Faith in the Lord makes you a deeply rooted tree that survives the drought. Faith in man makes you a shrub in the desert.

The doctor (9–11). The heart is "sick," and only the Great Physician can diagnose its problems and bring the necessary healing. Think of Jeremiah 17:9 the next time you say, "If I know my own heart!" You may be surprised what God sees there!

The worshiper (12–18). The throne of Judah had decayed, but because the prophet saw God's glorious throne on high, he had hope. God's throne room is our sanctuary, and He welcomes us to come to get the help we need.

Where Are You Written?

Those who will not trust the Lord have neither salvation nor security and are "written in the earth" (Jer. 17:13). Those who trust the Lord are written in heaven (Luke 10:20) in the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 21:27). When our Lord wrote on the ground (John 8:6, 8), was He perhaps referring to Jeremiah 17:13?

JEREMIAH 18—19

Mending the vessel (18:1–11). Individual believers are God's vessels (Acts 9:15; 2 Cor. 4:7), but the reference here is to the nation of Israel, a chosen vessel to bring God's blessing to the world. Romans 9:1–5 tells you what God put into the vessel. Many times in her history, when the nation would not yield

to God, He made her again. She was marred but still in His hands. She was marred but had potential. She was marred and He made her again; and He will do the same for anyone who yields to His will (Rom. 9:19–21).

Breaking the vessel (19:1–13). However, if the vessel becomes hardened, it cannot be made again. All God can do is break it, and that is what He did when Babylon captured Judah. The nation was beyond repair. The Valley of the Son of Hinnom was a site for pagan worship, but Josiah turned it into a garbage dump (2 Kings 23:10). In the Greek it is *Gehenna*, the New Testament word for "hell." *Tophet* (vv. 12–13) means "burning." Jeremiah gave a new name to the place: "the Valley of Slaughter" (v. 6).

People with hard hearts and stiff necks (19:15) may be easily broken.

Earthen Vessels

We have the spiritual treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7) so that we might share it with others. A vessel does not manufacture; it only contains and shares. All God asks is that we are clean, empty, and available. He will do the rest.

JEREMIAH 20

Jeremiah went from joy (v. 13) to despair (vv. 14–18), from bold proclamation (vv. 1–6) to burdened prayer (vv. 7–12). God's servants are human and have changes in their feelings. If we were in danger as he was, we might feel and act as he did.

As officer second to the high priest, Pashhur had a job of punishing persons who committed offenses against the temple, and his main target was Jeremiah. Religious people who have no saving faith in the Lord oppose those who have a true experience and message. Jesus was crucified by the Pharisees, who were certainly religious, and the disciples were scourged in the synagogues (Matt. 10:17).

Jeremiah gave Pashhur a new name: "Fear on every side." He was successful in the temple, but his success would vanish when the enemy appeared. Let God take care of the people who create problems for you.

Once again, the prophet was bold before men but broken before God. Always tell the Lord just how you feel and let Him apply the medicine to your heart. When He answers your prayers, sing His praises! The enemy waits for you to stumble (vv. 10-11), but the Lord can hold you up (Jude 24–25).

A Personal Lament

"I wish I had never been born!" Job felt that way when he was suffering (Job 3), and now Jeremiah takes up the lament (Jer. 20:14–18; see also 15:10). But when we speak that way, we seem to forget all the wonderful blessings we have enjoyed throughout life. Suffering has a way of erasing the happy memories and putting sad memories in their place. Remembering His mercies helps encourage us in times of trial.

When Upon Life's Billows

When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

Johnson Oatman, Jr.

JEREMIAH 21

The prophet delivered three messages, and the first was *to the king* (vv. 1–7). Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, rebelled against Babylon and ended up being captured and seeing his sons slain (2 Kings 24—25). Although he was not a man of faith, he wanted God's help. Jeremiah told him, "Babylon is not fighting against you, *God is!*" People ignore the Lord until they desperately need His help, and then they discover He is their enemy.

The second message was *to the people* (vv. 8–10), giving them the choice between life or death. Because of this counsel, Jeremiah was considered a traitor; but it was God's word to the people, and those who obeyed it lived.

The recipients of the third message were *members of the house of David,* Judah's kings (vv. 11–14). Josiah was Judah's last good king; the four kings who followed him were evil men whose doom Jeremiah announced. Had the kings led the nation in repentance, God would have shown mercy, but they persisted in their sins.

Jeremiah was not a popular preacher, but his message was faithful. Those who heeded him lived; those who resisted the Word died.

JEREMIAH 22

The prophet addressed four kings of Judah, beginning with Zedekiah, the last king, and then taking the preceding kings in the order of their reign.

He reminded Zedekiah (vv. 1–9) that he sat on the throne of *David* but was not ruling as David ruled. Not only would Zedekiah's palace be ruined, but the house (dynasty) of David would have no king until the Messiah would come.

He reminded Shallum (Jehoahaz [vv. 10–17]) that his father Josiah had been a godly man but Shallum was not following his example. His besetting sin was covetousness (v. 17). He reigned only three months before being taken to Egypt where he died.

Jehoiakim (vv. 18–23) would not listen to the voice of God. Even the animals know and obey their Creator (Isa. 1:2–3), but the heir to David's throne would not hear David's God. Instead

of having the usual state funeral, the king was buried in disgrace.

Coniah (Jeconiah; Jehoiachin [vv. 24–30]) was apparently very popular, but the idol would fall and be smashed. He had several children, but none of them would inherit the throne of David. Coniah was a castaway (vv. 26, 28) who by his sins jeopardized his future and the future of his family and the nation.

When we do not learn from the past or hear God and obey Him in the present, we destroy our future.

JEREMIAH 23

God expects the leaders of His people to be shepherds who love, guide, and care for them. But the shepherds in Judah at that time were selfish and disloyal to God's covenant.

The kings (1–8) scattered the people and did not protect them or provide for them. But one day God's King will gather them and establish His kingdom in righteousness. The more we are like Jesus Christ today, the better we will serve others in love.

The prophets and priests (9–40) did not give the people spiritual direction, nor were they examples of godliness. People who lack spiritual direction will lack spiritual discernment and believe anything. The false prophets invented their visions and passed them off as oracles from God. They did not get their messages from God. What they said was chaff compared to the wheat (v. 28).

No wonder false teachers are so popular! The sinful human heart does not want to be burned and broken by the fire and hammer of the Word of God. It prefers the chaff, even though chaff gives no nourishment.

Be sure that the people who give you spiritual counsel are called by God, walk with God, and obey God's Word. The false prophets' dreams eventually become nightmares.

JEREMIAH 24

The firstfruits were to be offered to the Lord as a sacrifice of thanksgiving for His goodness. Israel was to be like firstfruits to the Lord (Jer. 2:3), but the nation was not wholly devoted to God. Like the two baskets of figs, most of the people

were bad, and only a remnant were good because they obeyed God.

What life does to us depends on what life finds in us. The godly remnant experienced good things from God during the exile, but the ungodly citizens were consumed by trouble. The godly remnant made the best of a bad situation because they trusted the Lord (Rom. 8:28).

The important thing is a heart that knows the Lord and is wholly devoted to Him (v. 7). You may not be able to control the situation, but you can control how you respond to it and to God. You are to "keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). Believers today are to be "a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (James 1:18), and we want to give Him the best.

JEREMIAH 25

Imagine preaching for twenty-three years and seeing no visible results! Jeremiah was faithful to his calling even though the people opposed him and would not hear God's Word. We are judged by God according to our faithfulness, not our outward success. By men's standards, Jeremiah would be considered a failure (1 Cor. 4:1–5).

Judah's Punishment

According to 2 Chronicles 36:20–21, the Lord punished Judah for seventy years because that was the number of Sabbatical Years they had not observed (Lev. 25:1–7). The people did not rest on the weekly Sabbath (Jer. 17:19–27), and they did not give the land its rest every seven years (Lev. 26:27–35). When we keep to ourselves what belongs to God, we eventually lose it and suffer in the process.

The Babylonian captivity was God's way of punishing the rebels and purifying the godly remnant of the nation. The na-

tion was deaf to God's Word (vv. 4, 7, 8), but that Word would be fulfilled, not only to Israel, but to all the nations to which God sent it by His prophet.

God is long-suffering toward disobedient people and gives them many opportunities for repentance, but eventually He must act. He will be like a host who makes his guests drunk (vv. 15–29), a lion that attacks the flock (vv. 30–31, 34–38), a whirlwind that sweeps across the nation and destroys it (vv. 32–33).

JEREMIAH 26

How patient the Lord is with us! He keeps speaking to us and pleading with us to listen. "Listen and turn—hear and heed!" is His loving message to us. Will we obey?

How prone human nature is to resist the Word! The leaders should have called for a time of fasting and prayer, but instead they called for the execution of God's prophet! Are we "swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19)? Do we want what is right for us and the nation, or what is popular?

A Special Family

God used Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, to rescue Jeremiah. Shaphan was the man who found the Book of the Law when Josiah was restoring the temple (2 Kings 22:3–13). His son Gemariah begged King Jehoiakim not to destroy the book Jeremiah had written (Jer. 36:25). The whole family was devoted to God's Word, and God used it to help His servants.

How wise are those who learn from the past! The elders knew the Word of God and the history of the nation, and they were able to guide the mob toward sanity and justice.

How safe are those who are faithful to God when everything seems against them! Jeremiah stood his ground, and God protected him. Urijah ran away and was captured and

killed. The safest place in the world is in the will of God, for there you are ready to live or die.

JEREMIAH 27—28

Jeremiah wore a yoke (28:10) to convey his message that Judah must surrender to Babylon. He delivered his "yoke sermon" three times: first to some ambassadors who had come to form an alliance (27:1–11); next to King Zedekiah (27:12–15); and then publicly to the priests and people (27:16–22).

The false prophets were giving the nation false hopes, but Jeremiah told them the truth. Nebuchadnezzar was God's servant, doing God's will; and all nations should submit to him. If they accepted his yoke, they would live; if they rejected it, they would die.

God is in charge of yokes. The yoke He gives you is the right one for you, no matter who may put it on your shoulders. God can even use unsaved people to help you do His will. Accept every yoke as the yoke of God and He will transform it from bondage to blessing. Break the light yoke and the next yoke will be heavier. Everyone must wear a yoke.

Yokes

The nation broke God's yoke by her sins (Jer. 2:20; 5:5), and those sins became a heavy yoke (Lam. 1:14). This led to the even heavier yoke of Babylonian captivity. But God promised to remove the heavy yoke and give His people a new beginning (Jer. 30:8–11). Your youth is the best time to learn to wear the yoke (Lam. 3:27). Let God "break you" and control you now, and the future will be bright. Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30).

JEREMIAH 29

In 597 B.C., the Babylonians began to deport the Jews to Babylon. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles helps us understand how we can make the best of a difficult situation.

Accept it. Live as normal a life as you can and put up with inconveniences without complaining. Try to be a blessing to others. Be a peacemaker, not a troublemaker.

Be patient. God has the timing all worked out, and His plans never fail. He knows how long and how much.

Trust God. Verse 11 is a powerful promise to claim when you are "in exile." God thinks about you personally and is planning for you. His plans are for peace, not war, so you need not fear the future. His plans are purposeful, so let Him work out His will. No matter how difficult your situation may be, do not waste your suffering by resisting God.

Avoid false hopes. It is human to indulge in false hopes and grasp at every straw, but this approach leads to despair. Avoid the subtle voices of the false teachers with their false hopes. The Word of God will tell you what to do.

Far From Home

God's people in the world today are somewhat like the Jewish exiles in Babylon, for we are away from our heavenly home and living among those who do not accept our way of life. "Seek the peace of the city" (Jer. 29:7) is good counsel for us to follow as strangers on this earth. Peter explains how we should do this in 1 Peter 2:11—3:19.

JEREMIAH 30

Jeremiah saw in Judah's exile a picture of the future day of national suffering ("the time of Jacob's trouble" [v. 7]), when

the Jews will go through tribulation. He also saw in their restoration from exile a promise of the regathering of Israel in the latter days.

Judah had sinned, so God had to correct them in love; but He would not permit their enemies to take advantage of them. God is faithful to His people even when they are not faithful to Him (2 Tim. 2:12–13).

He chastens us so that He might heal us (vv. 12–17). The trials that He sends may be like bitter medicine, but they have a way of healing the sinful heart: "Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11).

In times of suffering, live for the joys of "afterward."

JEREMIAH 31

The tragedy of sin is that it keeps God from being to us all that He wants to be.

He is our Lover (1–6). The image of marriage is frequently found in both Jeremiah and Hosea. When we disobey God, we sin not only against His law but also against His love. We break the heart of God when we give our love to what He hates.

He is our Father (7–9). Israel is His firstborn; He redeemed the people in Egypt (Exod. 4:22). God wants to be a Father to us (2 Cor. 6:14–16), but our sins stand in the way.

He is our Shepherd (10–14). The flock of Israel was smitten and scattered, but the Lord was caring for it just the same. No matter how dark the day, the Shepherd will find you, lead you, and give you a song.

He is our Comforter (15–40). What lamentation there was when homes were broken up and people were carried off to a foreign land! But God gave the word of comfort: they will come home again. He promised them a new covenant that would change their hearts, and we have that covenant in Jesus Christ (Heb. 8; 10:1–25).

JEREMIAH 32

"Put your money where your mouth is!" is an American saying that means "Practice what you preach!" Jeremiah had

been preaching that the Jews would one day return from exile, so God made him prove that he really believed God's promise. Whenever you share the Word with people, expect to be tested. This is the only way they can tell the reality of your faith.

How foolish to purchase property in a town occupied by the enemy! But if you believe that there is a future for that land, you will not hesitate to buy it. God's people live in the future tense and measure today's decisions in the light of tomorrow's certainties.

You may feel let down after you have made a great step of faith, and that is the time to pray and let the Lord speak to you and assure you. People may laugh at you, but rest in the Lord and allow Him to encourage you.

JEREMIAH 33

Men may shut up God's servant, but they cannot shut out God's Word (2 Tim. 2:9). The Word comes to you—no matter where you are—if your heart is open to the Lord. God sometimes has a "second" message for you, so be alert.

God sent his imprisoned prophet a message of encouragement. The "sick" nation would one day have health; the defiled nation would be cleansed; war would give way to peace; and the truth of God would conquer the lies of the false prophets. There would be wedding songs, not funeral dirges; and righteousness would reign from the throne of David.

When will this occur? When Jesus Christ, the Son of David, reigns on earth (23:5–6) and makes Jerusalem a city of righteousness. Meanwhile, as He reigns in our lives, we can be His servants and minister to those who need these same blessings. Through us, the Lord can bring to others the life-changing message of spiritual health, cleansing, and peace, and they can start rebuilding what sin has torn down.

JEREMIAH 34

Bondage to the enemy (1–7). When the enemy finally broke through the city wall, King Zedekiah would try to escape but

would fail (2 Kings 25:1–7). Jeremiah told the king to submit to Babylon, but he would not obey. Therefore, the king would be captured, bound and blinded, and taken to Babylon where he would die. His bondage to sin led to bondage to the enemy. He destroyed himself.

Bondage to the brethren (8–22). The Jews were not to enslave their brethren; and every seven years, their servants were to be set free (Exod. 21:1–11; Deut. 15:12–18). The people in Jerusalem obeyed this law during the siege; but when the Babylonian army retreated because of the Egyptian army (v. 21; 37:5–10), the people took their slaves back again! The owners had obeyed when things were difficult, hoping to appease the Lord; but when things got better, they changed their minds (Ps. 66:13–14).

Obedience must come from devotion within us (Eph. 6:6) and not depend on circumstances around us. These masters were in greater slavery than their servants because they did not seek to please the Lord.

JEREMIAH 35

The founder of the Rechabite family had assisted Jehu in removing Baal worship from the land (2 Kings 10:15–17), so they had a godly heritage. When the Babylonian army moved in, the Rechabites had to abandon their nomadic way of life and enter Jerusalem for safety.

They abandoned their tents, but they did not abandon their standards. Even though they were in the house of the Lord with a prophet of the Lord, they refused to drink wine. The Rechabites did not ask others to agree with their tradition, but they would not violate it themselves. They were a loyal clan.

Man's tradition is not necessarily bad, unless it is contradicted by or substituted for God's truth (Matt. 15:1–20). You may not agree with the traditions of others, but are you as devoted to God's Word as they are to their traditions? The Jews refused to obey *the very law of God,* but the Rechabites obeyed *human traditions.* What an indictment against the Jews who claimed to know the true God! Is it an indictment against us today?

JEREMIAH 36

God's Word written (1–4). Unlike any other book, the Bible is God's Word, inspired by the Spirit of God (2 Tim. 3:13–17; 2 Pet. 1:19–21). Therefore, it can be trusted, and it must be obeyed.

God's Word announced (5–10). God uses human instruments to declare His divine Word to men: "And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14).

God's Word destroyed (11–26). The king should have been copying the Law for himself (Deut. 17:18–20) and heeding its message. Instead, he destroyed what Jeremiah had spoken and Baruch had written. You can try to destroy the Bible, but you will fail.

God's Word preserved (27–32). The king and his family are gone and would be forgotten were it not for the Book he tried to destroy! God's Word will endure: "Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven" (Ps. 119:89); "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Matt. 24:35).

"The deathless Book has survived three great dangers: the negligence of its friends; the false systems built upon it; the warfare of those who have hated it."

Isaac Taylor

JEREMIAH 37

Expect to be "used" (1–10). Zedekiah wanted the intercession of the man of God but not the instruction of the Word of God. He never should have separated the two (John 15:7; Acts 6:4). He wanted God to be his servant and deliver the city, but he was not willing to be God's servant and obey the Word. Do you ask God for help only in emergencies, or do you seek His direction each day?

Expect to be misunderstood (11–15). While going on an in-

nocent trip, Jeremiah was arrested, beaten, and put into prison! (See Acts 16:16–24.) The ungodly look for every opportunity to persecute the godly.

Expect to be ignored (16–17). It did not worry the king that God's servant was in prison illegally and suffering miserably. The king would not be seen with Jeremiah, but he still wanted Jeremiah's help.

Expect to be cared for by God (18–21). The Lord had promised Jeremiah years before that He would care for him (1:8, 19), and He kept His promise. Jeremiah did not have an easy life, but he had a good conscience, for he knew he had been faithful to God.

JEREMIAH 38

Zedekiah was a weak king who was more interested in being popular with his friends than in being right with God. Since he was a doubleminded man, he was "unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8).

First, he allowed some of his friends to arrest Jeremiah and put him in a dungeon. Next, he let Ebed-Melech and thirty guards rescue Jeremiah and take him to a safe place. Then, Zedekiah had a private meeting with Jeremiah to ask for help! If the king had accepted God's message and obeyed it, he would have had the courage to stand up to his unbelieving friends and do what was right.

Jeremiah sank in the mire (v. 6), but the king was sinking even deeper (v. 22). His fear (v. 19) and unbelief ruined him. He could have saved himself and his people had he submitted to the Lord. Instead, he trusted his friends, and they dragged him down into the mire of disgrace and defeat.

JEREMIAH 39

God rewarded Zedekiah for his wickedness (vv. 1–10). The king thought he could escape, but the enemy caught up with him. The last thing Zedekiah saw was the execution of his own sons; then he was blinded. He walked by sight and ended up in darkness. He lived to serve himself and lost everything. He learned the truth of these words: "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23).

God rewarded Jeremiah for his faithfulness (vv. 11–14). For forty difficult years, he courageously proclaimed God's Word, even though the people refused to obey it. If you measure ministry by "results," Jeremiah was a failure. Given his freedom, he chose to remain with his people and minister to them. He had a shepherd's heart.

God rewarded Ebed-Melech for his kindness (vv. 15–18; 38:7–13). Now we know why this foreigner rescued Jeremiah: he had put his faith in the God of Israel (v. 18). It must have been Jeremiah's witness that won him. An outsider trusted the God of Israel, but the Jews would not trust Him!

JEREMIAH 40—41

Liberty (40:1–6). God has a word for you in the crisis hours of life, so take time to listen. In this case, it came from the mouth of a Babylonian officer who knew Jeremiah's prophecies. If you could go where you wanted, where would it be? Jeremiah chose to remain with the hurting people of the land. What an encouragement he must have been to them!

Authority (40:7–12). God has ordained that men live under authority (Rom. 13); otherwise, there is chaos. Gedaliah told the people exactly what Jeremiah had counseled: submit to the enemy and seek to live normal lives. Are you praying for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–3)? Their job is not easy, and they need God's help.

Treachery (40:13–16). Was Gedaliah a bit naive? Did he have too much faith in human nature? Perhaps, but he should at least have taken precautions to protect his life. Ishmael was loyal to Zedekiah (41:1) and rejected the rule of the governor. His love for the fallen king was greater than his love for God, others, and the nation. He was more concerned about revenge than righteousness. What could have been a peaceful transition became a civil war—all because of one man's wickedness.

JEREMIAH 42

"Back to Egypt!" was Israel's cry whenever they found themselves in trouble. It was true in the days of Moses (Exod. 16:3; 17:3; Num. 11:4–6; 14:1–5) and Isaiah (Isa. 30:1–5; 31:1–3),

and now in the trying days after the Babylonian conquest (41:17). God had told them to stay in the land, but they were afraid to obey.

They had already made up their minds to go, but they thought it would be good to ask the prophet to pray for them: "Pray for us! We will obey!" How pious their words sounded! (See Matt. 15:7–9.) Have you ever tried to fool God's servants with pious prayers and promises?

Jeremiah prayed and waited for God's word for that hour. Perhaps God did have another plan for the people. No, God's plan had not been changed. God told them not to be afraid; He told them to stay in the land and trust His care. But God also told His servant that the leaders were hypocrites and not to be trusted.

Faith and patience go together (Heb. 6:12; 10:36): "Whosoever believes will not act hastily" (Isa. 28:16).

"*Solemn prayers, rapturous devotions, are but repeated hypocrisies unless the heart and mind be conformable to them.*"

William Law

JEREMIAH 43

Everything Jeremiah had predicted had come true, but they called him a false prophet! Once you have decided to disobey the Lord, you can always find excuses for rejecting God's truth. It must have been painful for Baruch and Jeremiah to endure the slander of those arrogant men, people they had helped for many years. But Jesus was treated the same way, so Jeremiah was experiencing "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil. 3:10).

God had the last word: their trip to Egypt would be a death march. *The only safe place is in the will of God.* The army from which the Jews fled in Judah would come to Egypt and judge them because no one can run away from problems.

JEREMIAH 44

How shall God bring His people to the place where He can bless and enjoy them? He sent His servants with the Word, but people would not listen. He chastened them with drought, but they did not repent. Then He allowed the enemy to humiliate them, but the people still would not obey the will of God.

Perhaps it would be different in Egypt. No, the change in geography did not change their hearts. They practiced their idolatry in Egypt, they even defended it! Before King Josiah's reform, when they bowed down to idols, "they had plenty of food, were well-off, and saw no trouble" (v. 17)—as if those things are tests of truth! The wicked may prosper, but that is no excuse to sin.

In His mercy, God would rescue a small remnant of His people. The rest would be slain in the land they thought was so safe. Was God watching over them? Yes, but not for blessing (v. 27).

JEREMIAH 45

This brief chapter focuses on Jeremiah's faithful secretary, Baruch, who shared the prophet's trials and sorrows. It records an event that occurred after Baruch wrote a second copy of the prophecy because Jehoiakim had burned the original (chap. 36).

God sees your work. What a disappointment it was when Baruch heard that everything he had written had gone up in smoke. When it seems like your work and witness are useless, remember for whom you are doing them.

God knows your trials. Baruch could have had an easier life, but he chose to identify himself with the most unpopular man in the land. Why? Because he believed in the Lord and relied on His Word.

God hears your words. Like any servant of God, Baruch had his difficult days when he felt everything was falling apart. God heard in Baruch's cry a dangerous desire for "great things." If he had not identified with the prophet, how great Baruch might have been!

God meets your needs. Suppose Baruch had become a great man in the kingdom? Where was the kingdom then?

Baruch was alive and cared for because he was associated with Jeremiah. If you are going to seek great things, seek them for God, not for yourself.

Baruch, An Honorable Servant

Baruch's brother Seraiah was an officer in the king's court (Jer. 32:12; 51:59), so he might have gotten an appointment for Baruch; but God chose Baruch to be His servant and His servant's servant. Beware selfish ambitions that run contrary to the will of God; God may let you succeed! *(See Matt. 20:20–28.)*

JEREMIAH 46

Jeremiah was a prophet to the nations as well as to Judah (1:5), and his book closes with prophecies concerning the nations, beginning with Egypt.

Josiah, Judah's last good king, was slain at Carchemish when he fought Egypt (2 Chron. 35:20–27); but now Egypt would be defeated at Carchemish by the Babylonians. The Egyptians thought they were like the Nile, rising up to flood the enemy, but they would fail (vv. 7–10).

When God looked at the Egyptians, He did not see a mighty river. He saw a heifer that would be bitten by the Babylonian fly (v. 20), and her allies were fat bulls heading for the slaughter (v. 21; see also v. 10). The army of Babylon was like grasshoppers in number (vv. 23–24), and Egypt would flee like a frightened serpent (v. 22). God had spoken!

God gave a message of peace to His people in captivity: they would return to their land and be established again (vv. 27–28). They had to be corrected in love, but they would not be destroyed: "I will save you . . . I am with you." What words of encouragement! Claim them today!

JEREMIAH 47—48

The Egyptians had defeated Philistia, but the Babylonians would destroy both Philistia (chap. 47) and Moab (chap. 48). The Babylonian army would be like a rising river (47:2) and a sword in the hands of the Lord (47:6).

Moab was known for its pride (48:29, 42), so the Lord brought those people low. They relied on a false god and trusted material wealth (48:7), so their god was captured and their wealth was plundered. They lost all their defenses!

Moab was also known for its wine. But the vessels would be emptied and broken, and the people would become drunk with God's wrath (48:12, 26, 38). The Babylonians were God's "wine-workers" to give Moab a "new taste" they had never had before (48:11). Sometimes God has to pour us "from vessel to vessel" to make us what He wants us to be.

The bottles were broken (48:12), the staff was broken (48:17), and their arm was broken (48:25): "How she is broken down!" (48:39). Had Moab been broken *before* the Lord, she would not have been broken *by* the Lord.

JEREMIAH 49

The Ammonites and Moabites were descended from Lot (Gen. 19:30–38) and were enemies of the Jews. Milcom (Molech) was the god of the Ammonites, worshiped in terrible orgies that involved the sacrificing of children. His name means "the reigning one," but he would reign no more. He would go into captivity and not be able to rescue himself, which is what happens to all false gods.

The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, brother of Jacob (Gen. 36), and they, too, hated the Jews. They were recognized for their great wisdom (Obad. 8), but they would not be wise enough to stop the Babylonian invasion.

Their judgment would be like the stripping of a vineyard (v. 9), getting drunk (v. 12), the destroying of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 18), the attacking of a lion from the Jordan thicket (v. 19), and the sudden swooping down of an eagle (v. 22). There was no escape!

Damascus would be feeble and fearful, like a woman in la-

bor (v. 24); and Kedar, Hazor, and Elam would be scattered to the wind like chaff (vv. 32, 36). All these proud kingdoms felt secure in resisting the Lord, and He bore with them in His long-suffering. But their day of opportunity ran out, and all God could do was judge them.

Our Merciful God

In His wrath, God remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2). He gave promises to the Jews (46:27–28), the Moabites (48:47), the Ammonites (49:6), and the people of Elam (49:39). These nations did not reappear on the scene when the Jews went back to their land, but they will be included when the Lord restores His people at the return of Christ and the establishment of His kingdom.

JEREMIAH 50—51

This prophecy was given in the fourth year of Zedekiah's reign, and Jeremiah sent it with Baruch's brother, Seraiah, to be read publicly in Babylon (51:59–64). In Scripture, Babylon symbolizes man's worldly system organized in opposition to God (Gen. 11:1–9; Rev. 17—18).

The Persians would come out of the north, defeat Babylon, and leave it desolate (50:3). Babylon had been God's hammer (50:23), cup (51:7), and "battle-ax" (51:20–23) to bring His judgment to the sinful nations; but now her sins would be judged, particularly her brutal treatment of Israel (51:34–35).

Throughout this prophecy, God gives words of hope to His people still in captivity. Both Israel and Judah will be reunited and restored to their land (50:4–5). The scattered flock will be gathered (50:6–7, 17) and the sinful nation forgiven (50:19–20). They are guilty of sin, but God the Judge will plead their case (50:33–34). The forsaken wife will be reunited to her Husband (51:5), and the nation will be vindicated (51:10).

How will all of this happen? By the power of the God of Israel who is not like the dead idols of the heathen (51:15–19). His people must flee this evil system (51:6, 45–48) and separate themselves wholly to the Lord (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1; Rev. 18:4).

Babylon is still a desolation, and that ruin is a reminder that God is Governor of the nations and Judge of all the earth. Israel is still among the nations because her God is the Maker of all things (51:19).

JEREMIAH 52

Jeremiah's prophecy opens with God saying, "I am ready to perform My word" (1:12); and it closes with evidence that God did what He said He would do. This chapter parallels 2 Kings 24—25 and also Jeremiah 39; and it sets the stage for your reading of Lamentations.

Zedekiah was a rebel, not only against the king of Babylon but also against the Lord; and he lost both battles. He led his sons and his leaders into death and himself into darkness and bondage (Judg. 16:20–21). The religious leaders who had persecuted Jeremiah were slain by the enemy (vv. 24–27).

The temple was plundered despite the promises given by the false prophets (27:19—28:4). The walls were broken down, and the city and the temple were burned. God would rather destroy His city and His house than permit His people to sin successfully. If they will not glorify Him in obedience, they must honor Him in judgment.

The people were deported to remain in captivity for seventy years (25:1–14). The words of Jeremiah were precious to them during those difficult years, just as God's Word should be precious to His people "in exile" in this world today. Follow Jeremiah's good example and joyfully feed on His Word (15:16).

LAMENTATIONS

As the name indicates, this is a book of "funeral dirges," written by Jeremiah after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. His heart was broken, and his grief reveals the broken heart of God. God had to chasten His people, and it grieved Him to do it.

The verses in chapters 1—2 and 4—5 follow the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 has sixty-six verses, and each triad of verses begins with a successive letter. The turning point in Jeremiah's grief is found in chapter 3, although he gives expressions of faith and hope here and there in his lament.

Sin is costly, God must punish sin, but God's mercy never fails: these are the key lessons of Lamentations.

LAMENTATIONS 1

Is sin worth it? Sin promises to enrich you, but in the end it robs you of the good things God has given you. Jerusalem had been a popular princess; now she had become a lonely widow who was a slave (vv. 1–2). Once she had enjoyed splendor, but now her glory was gone (v. 6). All she had left were memories (v. 7), and remembering only made the pain greater. She had refused the yoke of submission to the Lord (Jer. 27—28), but now she had to wear the yoke of the enemy (v. 14; Jer. 5:5).

Does anybody care? There was no one to comfort the people (vv. 2, 9, 16–17, 21). Even those who beheld the ruins showed no concern (v. 12). Former friends who praised her were now enemies who despised her (vv. 2, 8). Even the Lord was like an enemy to His people. The people who encourage you in your sin will discourage you in your suffering.

Can anybody question God? "The LORD is righteous," but

His people had been rebellious (vv. 18, 20). Read the chapter again and note the words used to describe their sin. Jeremiah had warned them, but they listened instead to the false prophets (2:14; 4:13). God is holy, and sin must be judged.

Those Who Pass By

Lamentations 1:12 is sometimes applied to our Lord Jesus Christ when He hung on the cross. Except for a small group of followers who stayed at the cross, nobody else offered Him any sympathy. They mocked Him and added to His pain. Yet, He did it for you and me! *He felt the anger of God against* our *sins. Do we have compassion on those who suffer, or do we pass by "on the other side" (Luke 10:25–37)?*

LAMENTATIONS 2

Sin brings destruction (5–6, 8–9, 11, 22; Jer. 5:6, 10, 17). History records that Babylon was the enemy, but Jeremiah said that God was the enemy (vv. 4–5). He supervised the destruction of the walls and defenses (vv. 5, 8–9), the temple (vv. 6–7), and the people (vv. 10–12); Babylon was just His battle-ax (Jer. 51:20–23).

Sin brings disgrace (15–16). The passersby not only offer no comfort (1:12) but contribute to Jerusalem's shame (v. 15). The enemy boasts of a great victory but does not give glory to God. All the faithful remnant could do was trust the purposes of God (v. 17) and cry out to Him for mercy (vv. 18–20).

LAMENTATIONS 3

This central chapter marks the turning point in Jeremiah's experience of grief and prayer. As he *looked at himself* (vv. 1–18), he saw an aged man on a winding path in the dark, being

pursued by lions. The more he considered his feelings, the more hopeless he felt.

Then he looked away from himself and by faith *looked to the Lord* (vv. 19–39). Now he can say, "I have hope" (v. 21). Why? Because of God's mercies, compassions, and faithfulness: "For He does not afflict willingly" (v. 33; Hos. 11:8–9), and He "will not cast off forever" (v. 31). God does not enjoy having to chasten His people; but as a loving Father, He must do it (Prov. 3:11–12).

Finally, Jeremiah *looked to the people* (vv. 40–66) and called for a time of prayer and confession of sin. The "weeping prophet" (vv. 48–49) pleaded with the people to lift their hearts and hands to the Lord and ask Him for forgiveness and mercy.

What did God do for His suffering servant? "You drew near on the day I called on You, and said, 'Do not fear!'" (v. 57). Wait before the Lord (vv. 25–26), and He will speak to you from His Word.

A New Day

If God's compassions are "new every morning" (Lam. 3:23), you have the right to claim them daily. Let each morning be for you the dawn of a new day. Start over again, no matter how many times you failed the day before. If God's mercies never fail, depend on them during the day. He is faithful, and His faithfulness will not fail.

LAMENTATIONS 4

The greatest destruction from sin is not to buildings but to people. In God's sight, His people had been like gold and precious gems (Exod. 19:5), but now they were only cheap clay pots. People accustomed to luxuries could not find the necessities of life (v. 5). The healthy young men were but walking

corpses and would be better off dead (vv. 7–9). If you want to cheapen yourself and others, sin will help you do it.

The children suffered the most (vv. 4, 10; 2:20) as children often do when parents sin. And it all came about because the leaders of the land would not obey the Word of God but listened to false teachers (v. 13; 2:14). God's Word to Joshua is still true (Josh. 1:8), and the Lord still keeps His promises.

"I'm against sin. I'll kick it as long as I've got a foot, and I'll fight it as long as I've got a fist. I'll butt it as long as I've got a head. I'll bite it as long as I've got a tooth. When I'm old and fistless and footless and toothless, I'll gum it till I go home to Glory and it goes home to perdition."

Billy Sunday

LAMENTATIONS 5

Remember. There is no prayer in chapter 4, but now the people pray to God and describe their reproach. They have lost their freedom, their joy, and their inheritance, and they are paying dearly just to stay alive—all because of the sins of their fathers. God knows your needs and will not forget you (Isa. 49:14–18).

Rule. They had lost their crown (v. 16), but God was still on His throne (v. 19). The defeat of Judah was not the victory of the false gods of Babylon! No matter how hopeless you feel, no matter how difficult the present situation may be, God is still ruling in this universe, and He will not forsake you.

Renew and restore. God's chastening is proof that He loves you and has not forsaken you (Heb. 12:5–11). One day, He will take you out of the furnace and give you a new start. You will be a new and better person if you let Him have His way.

EZEKIEL

While Jeremiah was ministering to the people in Judah, Ezekiel was ministering to the exiles in Babylon. He was taken to Babylon in 597 B.C. with the second deportation; and five years later, he received his call to ministry (592 B.C.). Like Jeremiah, he was a priest who was called to be a prophet; and also like Jeremiah, he preached action sermons that caught the attention of the people.

There are four sections to the book: (1) God's call of Ezekiel (chaps. 1—3); (2) God's judgment on Jerusalem (chaps. 4—24); (3) God's judgment on the nations (chaps. 25—32); and (4) God's restoration of His people (chaps. 33—48).

Ezekiel's prophecy emphasizes the glory of God and the honor of God's name. Sixty-seven times the statement "I am the LORD" is found in this book, and several times God is said to act "for [His] name's sake" so that His holy name would "not be profaned." Had the people of Judah been concerned for the honor of the Lord, He would not have dishonored them before their enemies.

EZEKIEL 1

At the age of thirty, when he could have started serving in the temple (Num. 4:3), Ezekiel was called to serve as God's prophet in Babylon. He was in captivity, but that did not keep the heavens from opening so that he could see the glory of God (Rev. 1:9ff.).

He saw God's providence (1–21). The vision shows how God is working in His world. What looks like a storm to us is the tool of His providence, the wheels spinning within the wheels and the living creatures going back and forth like lightning. It is all too much for us to understand but not for God to control. Romans 8:28 still stands!

He saw God's throne (22–27). Far above the storm, the wheels, the living creatures, and the firmament is God's throne ruling over all. It looked as though Nebuchadnezzar was ruling everything, but God was still on His throne: "The LORD sits as King forever" (Ps. 29:10). The next time you face a storm, look high enough to see God's exalted throne.

He saw the rainbow (28). Usually you see the rainbow when the storm is over (Gen. 9:8–17), and only an arc at that. Ezekiel saw the rainbow during the storm, and it completely encircled the throne! A symbol of God's grace, the rainbow assures us that the Lord is with us and will not forsake us, especially when we are going through a storm.

EZEKIEL 2—3

After the vision came the voice, which is as it ought to be. God's Word endures after the memory of visions fades (2 Pet. 1:16–21). Ezekiel had all the qualities that make for success in serving the Lord.

He saw God's glory and fell on his face in humble worship (1:28). Only a vision of the glorious throne of God can sustain you when the way grows difficult.

Faithful Watchmen

It is a serious thing to be a watchman, for the destiny of precious souls is at stake (Ezek. 3:16–21; 33:1–9). The watchman must be alert to every opportunity and must not be afraid to sound the alarm. False watchmen are not faithful (Isa. 56:10–12) and will have much to answer for at the Judgment. Paul was a faithful watchman who was able to say, "I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:26–27).

He stood on his feet, was filled with the Spirit, and listened to the Word of God (2:1–5). He fed on the Word, which gave him what he needed to speak God's Word (2:6—3:3). In this, he was like Jeremiah (Jer. 15:16), John (Rev. 10:9), and Jesus (Matt. 4:4).

He set his face to do God's will (3:4–11; Isa. 50:7; Luke 9:51). Several times in the book God tells him to "set his face" against something. Ezekiel depended on the hand of God to strengthen him (3:12–14). He sat with the people and identified with their pain (3:15), and he waited patiently for God's word to come to him (3:16–23).

When God spoke, He made Ezekiel a watchman and told him to stay home and be quiet until he received the message to speak. His solitude and silence were signs to the people that God was angry with them for rejecting His Word.

Ezekiel knew that he had been called at a difficult time to do a difficult work with a difficult people, and yet he obeyed the Lord. Little did he know the price he would have to pay to be a watchman, but he was faithful.

EZEKIEL 4—5

Ezekiel began his public ministry with four action sermons that declared God's judgment against Jerusalem. First, he "played war" to demonstrate the siege of the city (4:1–3). The iron plate represented the barrier between God and His people (Lam. 3:43–44). Nothing could stop Babylon from capturing the city.

Then, he lay bound for part of each day, 390 days on left side and then 40 days on the right, to show how many years both Israel and Judah had sinned. How long-suffering God was during those years and how they broke His heart (6:9)!

During those fourteen months and ten days, Ezekiel had to ration his food and water as the people in Jerusalem would do. Compare 4:14 with Acts 10:14. Though he was not serving as a priest, Ezekiel still obeyed the priestly code. No doubt the people watched him day after day and told others about his bizarre behavior, and that helped to spread the message.

His fourth sign involved shaving his head and face, a real sacrifice for a Jew. The hair represented the people in Jerusalem who faced three destinies: death by famine, death by the sword, and dispersion among the nations (Deut. 28:47–57). But

a believing remnant would be protected and saved by the Lord.

Why was God angry with His people? Because they rebelled against His law (5:6), defiled His temple (5:11), and did more abominations than the heathen nations around them (5:6–7). They did not glorify the Lord but used all His blessings to promote their sin.

Three hundred and ninety years is a long time to continue in sin! We can only marvel at the long-suffering of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:1–9).

EZEKIEL 6—7

Ruin (6:1–7, 11–14). The signs were over; now the prophet gave two sermons. Judgment was coming to the mountains and valleys where the people carried on their idolatrous worship. The whole system would be destroyed and the people with it. It was the end!

Repentance (6:8–10). In grace, God would spare a remnant that would remember Him and repent of their sins. The sin that breaks the heart of God should break our hearts as well.

Repayment (7:1–27). Four times God says, "I will repay" (7:3–4, 8–9; See also Gal. 6:6–8). All the things Judah trusted will not help them, not money (7:19), idols (7:20–22), or their leaders (7:23–27).

It was the end: "The end has come!" (7:2, 3, 6); "Then they shall know that I am the LORD" (7:27).

EZEKIEL 8

Chapters 8—11 constitute a vision God gave to Ezekiel of the defilement of the temple (chap. 8), the destruction of the people (chap. 9), and the departure of God's glory from His house (chaps. 10—11). The vision burdened Ezekiel to pray (9:8) and prepared him to preach the Word (11:25). God will one day judge our evil world. Knowing this, what does it motivate you to do?

What happened in the temple was indicative of what was happening in the nation: it was given over to the worship of idols. There was an image at the door, and there were idolatrous pictures in the inner chamber. Men and women wor-

shiped idols openly, and others did it "in the dark" (v. 12); but all were guilty. When sin comes in at the door of a person's life, it eventually moves to the inner chambers and takes over. Ponder Proverbs 4:23.

This sin brought violence to the land (v. 17) and removed God's glory from His house (v. 6). What a price to pay for sin!

EZEKIEL 9

The glory of God moved from the Holy of Holies and began to depart from the temple: "Ichabod—the glory has departed" (1 Sam. 4:19–22; Jer. 7:1–15). Without the glory of God, the temple was just another building; and without the presence of God, we are just like other people (Exod. 33:12–16).

God's judgment begins with His people (v. 6; 1 Pet. 4:17), for greater privileges bring greater responsibilities. Either we judge our sins, or God will judge them (1 Cor. 11:31).

Even in His wrath, God is merciful and saves a believing remnant, those who "sigh and cry" over the sins of God's people. Are you among "the sighers and criers"? Like Ezekiel, are you interceding and asking for mercy?

EZEKIEL 10

The throne (1). If all you do is look at the sins of the land, you will end up very discouraged. Do as the prophet did: lift your eyes higher and get a new vision of the throne of God (Jer. 17:12).

The fire (2–17). Coals from the altar brought cleansing to Isaiah (Isa. 6:6–7), but they brought judgment to Jerusalem. The altar is the place where sin is atoned for because sin is judged. Had the nation sought God's mercy and obeyed His Word, the coals would have brought cleansing. Yet even in the midst of terrible judgment, God's "wheels" were still turning and His purposes being worked out in the world.

The glory (18–22). God will not share His glory with idols (Isa. 42:8); therefore, He had to abandon His house. His glory moved to the door of the east gate, poised to move again (11:22–23). If the nation would not glorify God in their obedience, they would glorify Him in judgment.

The Fullness of the Spirit

In Old Testament times, the Spirit came upon people temporarily for special reasons, but Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would stay with His church forever (John 14:16). God took His Spirit from King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14), and David prayed that the Spirit would not depart from him (Ps. 51:11). Our prayer must be that we not grieve the Spirit (Eph. 4:30), lie to the Spirit (Acts 5), or quench the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19) but have the Spirit's fullness for life and service each day (Eph. 5:18ff.).

EZEKIEL 11

The caldron (1–13). The leaders in Jerusalem committed two errors. First, they rested on a false confidence that since the deportation was ended, nothing terrible could happen to them. Jerusalem was safe. The second error was that they were the "choice meat" and the people they had slain (the "sighers and criers" of 9:4) were only "scraps." Pride and false confidence made them arrogant.

But God saw things differently. The slain people were the "choice meat," and the leaders of the city were the "scraps." The evil men would try to flee the sword, but God would meet them "at the border." They would *almost* make it! Then the city would indeed be a caldron where God would pour out His anger (chap. 24).

The sanctuary (14–21). The remnant might be taken from their city and temple, but they could not lose the presence of their God. They would one day be regathered, renewed, and restored to their land. There is always hope.

The glory (22–25). Judgment cannot fall as long as God's

glory dwells in the city, so the glory moved out to the Mount of Olives. This parallels Matthew 23:38—24:3.

If in your character and conduct you major on the glory of God, you need not fear the judgment of God.

EZEKIEL 12

When people become spiritually blind and deaf, God uses unusual means to get His Word across to them. Ezekiel preached two more action sermons to warn them that judgment was at hand. The prophet lived the message he was declaring.

His actions in the morning portrayed the people who were packing to go into captivity, while his actions in the evening portrayed the futile attempt of King Zedekiah to escape. God knew what would occur, and nobody could alter His plans.

Ezekiel's actions at his meals portrayed the terror the people would experience in spite of their believing that the worst was past. The false prophets said that people like Ezekiel and Jeremiah were "doomsayers" and their dire predictions would not occur. But God's Word never fails, and it is always fulfilled on time.

God does not ask you to do bizarre things as He did Ezekiel, but can others tell by your life-style that you believe Jesus is coming and that He will one day judge the world (2 Pet. 3:10–18)? Is your life an action sermon that catches the attention of people who are blind and deaf to God's truth?

EZEKIEL 13

False prophets. Imagine being called to preach against the preachers! Why were those prophets so dangerous? Because they invented their messages and did not get them from the mouth of God. Instead of being shepherds who faithfully led the flock, they were foxes living on refuse. Spiritually speaking, the false prophets were religious scavengers, living among ruins they had made themselves.

False peace. This was also Jeremiah's word of warning (Jer. 6:14; 8:11), and yet the people rejected it. Even though he was running away from God, Jonah was able to sleep in a storm

(Jon. 1:5). Having confidence in our feelings is not the same as having confidence from God.

False protection. No matter how strong the wall looked, it would not survive the storm. God wanted to wash things white (Isa. 1:18), but the false prophets whitewashed things. The common people rejoiced at the comforting words of the false prophets, but the "sighers and criers" were saddened by them (v. 22).

John asserted, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4).

EZEKIEL 14

The prophet had seen idols in the temple in Jerusalem (chap. 8), but now he saw idols in the hearts of the elders in Babylon (vv. 3, 4, 7). God had disciplined those men by taking them from Judah to Babylon, and He had been merciful to them in sparing their lives; yet nothing brought them to repentance. They pretended to be spiritual by inquiring of Ezekiel, but God saw their hearts and told His servant the truth (Heb. 4:13).

Jesus' Righteousness

Sinners are saved from God's eternal wrath not by their righteousness (Titus 3:4–7) but the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Savior of the world (Isa. 53:6; 2 Cor. 5:21). Not only that, but He is in heaven today, interceding for His people at the right hand of God (Heb. 4:14–16; 1 John 2:1–2). This is not an excuse for us to sin, *but it is an encouragement to know that our future is secure because of what He did for us on the cross and what He is now doing for us in heaven.*

Depth of mercy,
Can there be Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God His wrath forbear,
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?

There for me the Saviour stands,
Holding forth His wounded hands;
God is love! I know, I feel,
Jesus weeps and loves me still.

—Charles Wesley

Judgment was inevitable: famine, hungry beasts, war, and pestilence (Rev. 6:1–8). Noah saved his family (Heb. 11:7), Daniel rescued his friends (Dan. 2), and Job prayed for his three friends and delivered them (Job 42:7–10); but *nobody's intercession would save Jerusalem or anybody in it.* A person's righteousness could save only himself or herself; it could not save another.

Cherishing sin in the heart will lead to practicing sin in the life: "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7). A good prayer for all of us is Psalm 139:23–24.

EZEKIEL 15—16

Unfruitfulness (15). The vine was a familiar emblem of Israel (Ps. 80:8–13; Isa. 5:1–7). Vines are good for only two things: bearing or burning. You do not build with wood from the vine because it does not lend itself to being cut and shaped. If the vine does not bear fruit, it is useless, and that was the condition of God's people in Ezekiel's day. If you share the life of God through faith in Jesus Christ, let that life reveal itself in the fruit you bear for His glory.

Unfaithfulness (16). Israel was the wife of Jehovah only because of His grace and love. She was in wretched shape when He called her and saved her. He showered her with gifts, which she used to commit spiritual adultery as she worshiped the

idols of the other nations. She was both an adulterous wife who broke the marriage covenant and a harlot who paid others to sin with her. God judged Sodom and Israel (Samaria, the northern kingdom), but that did not deter Judah; she went right on sinning. No wonder God became angry and judged the people.

In Romans 7:4, Paul applies these two images to believers: we are "married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God." Jesus Christ wants our single-hearted devotion as we share our love with Him (2 Cor. 11:2–3).

"*Lord, let me not live to be useless.*"

John Wesley

EZEKIEL 17

God used allegories to arouse interest and capture attention. Jesus used parables for the same purpose (Matt. 13:10–17).

The great eagle (Nebuchadnezzar) came to Jerusalem (Lebanon) and took to Babylon the top branch of the cedar (King Jehoiachin). He left some of the seed (King Zedekiah), which grew into a low vine. Zedekiah made a covenant to be loyal to Babylon, but then he broke it (vv. 15, 16, 18) and turned to Egypt for help (vv. 7–8; Jer. 37). The result? The king of Babylon will come back and destroy the lowly vine of Judah (vv. 9–10).

The cedar represents the Davidic dynasty. One day God will take a lowly young twig from David's line (Jesus Christ) and will establish His glorious kingdom (Isa. 11:1–9). But before He can enter into that glory, He must suffer for the sins of the world.

"O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!"

EZEKIEL 18

Have you ever accused God of not being fair? The Jews were doing that (vv. 25, 29–30) and quoting a familiar proverb

to argue their case (v. 2; Jer. 31:29–30). If the fathers did the sinning, why should their children do the suffering? Is not God unjust when He punishes the children for the fathers' sins?

But God does not do that, nor does He take pleasure in sending judgment (vv. 23, 32). He would gladly forgive sinners if they would only repent. God judges *individuals*—regardless of what their fathers have done (vv. 4, 20). You cannot claim your father's righteousness, nor can you be punished for your father's sin. You might be punished *by* your father's sin, but that is another matter (Deut. 5:9).

The supreme need is for a "new heart and a new spirit" (v. 31), which can come only through faith in Christ. "Turn and live!" is God's loving call to sinners today. It is a matter not of fairness but of grace.

Punishment for Sins

God does not punish the innocent for the guilty except in the case of His Son. *On the cross, Jesus took the punishment for your sins. God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, "yet it pleased the* LORD *to bruise Him" (Isa. 53:10), "for Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18).*

EZEKIEL 19

Jeremiah was not the only prophet to write funeral dirges. Ezekiel wrote this one five years before Jerusalem fell. He used two familiar images of the nation in speaking about the fate of their kings.

The lioness (1–9). The lion is the royal animal, and Ezekiel was speaking about the rulers of the land: Jehoahaz (vv. 2–4; Jer. 22:11–12), who died in Egypt; and the present king, Zedekiah (vv. 5–9), who was blinded and taken to Babylon (Jer. 39).

None of Judah's "cubs" succeeded in saving the land because they resisted the Word of God.

The vine (10–14). We have met this image of Israel several times already. The prophet had spoken *about* Zedekiah, but now he speaks *to* Zedekiah and tells him that the beautiful, luxuriant vine would be withered by the east wind (v. 12; 17:10), plucked up, and planted in Babylon. That would be the end of David's line; there would be no strong branch out of which to make a scepter—until the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of David (Matt. 1:1; Luke 1:30–33)! Judah will supply the scepter (Gen. 49:8–10).

When it looks like man has done his worst and everything is at an end, remember that God always has the last word—and His "Last Word" is His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–2).

EZEKIEL 20

History (1–32). In his message to the Jewish elders, Ezekiel reviewed the nation's history: the Exodus (vv. 1–9), the wilderness journey (vv. 10–17), and the conquest of their land (vv. 18–32). He pointed out two facts: (1) the nation was guilty of repeated rebellion against the Lord (vv. 8, 13, 21), and (2) the Lord acted as He did for His name's sake (vv. 9, 14, 22). He could easily have destroyed the nation, but what would the Gentiles have said about Israel's God?

Honor God's Name

For His name's sake, the Lord forgives our sins (1 John 2:12), guides us (Pss. 23:3; 31:3), deals with us (Ps. 109:21), and revives us (Ps. 143:11). For His name's sake, we ought to serve Him (3 John 7; Rev. 2:3), sacrifice for Him (Matt. 19:29), and be willing to suffer reproach (Matt. 10:22; 24:9). All that we do should be for the honor and glory of God's name (1 Cor. 10:31).

Repeated rebellion against God's will is serious. The Lord is long-suffering, but we must never take this for granted. Eventually He must chasten His rebellious children for His name's sake. If we do not glorify Him by obeying His commandments, we must glorify Him by submitting to His chastening (Heb. 12).

Hope (33–49). God chastens us that He might restore us, and there is always hope. The repeated "I will" statements assure us that God is working for us and not against us: "I will bring you out! I will plead! I will bring you in! I will accept you!" Why does He do it? "For [His] name's sake" (v. 44).

EZEKIEL 21

Jeremiah called Babylon God's battle-ax (Jer. 51:20–23), and Ezekiel called Babylon God's sword. (The word *sword* is used more than a dozen times in this chapter.) God pulled His sword out of the scabbard (vv. 1–7), prepared it for use (vv. 8–17), and then pointed it toward Jerusalem (vv. 18–27) and Ammon (vv. 28–32). The Ammonites had united with Judah against Babylon but had escaped invasion. However, their judgment eventually came.

God uses unbelievers to accomplish His purposes and can even overrule their pagan methods of making decisions (vv. 18–23; Prov. 16:33). God's people did not obey the declared will of God, but the pagan nations obeyed God and did not know it. What a paradox!

The prophet's responses to this message attracted the attention of the people, for he sighed (vv. 6–7) and wailed (v. 12). What is your response to the message of the coming judgment of God (2 Pet. 3:10–18)?

EZEKIEL 22

Four images stand out in this chapter.

The court (1–16). The prophet became a prosecuting attorney as he indicted Judah for her sins, proving that the leaders and the common people alike were guilty of breaking the law of God.

The furnace (17–22). Jerusalem would indeed become like a furnace when the army of Babylon encamped around it. But

there was no good metal left in the city; all was dross. The nation had been cheapened by sin.

The jungle (23–27). The prophets were like lions and the princes like wolves, all fighting to get what they could from the people. Like animals, the priests did not make a difference between what was holy and what was unclean (Matt. 7:6).

The wall (28–31). With their false visions and messages, the prophets whitewashed the nation's sins and covered its weaknesses. (See Ezek. 13.) God is still looking for people who will not only build strong walls but *become walls* by standing in the gap in the hour of danger.

People in the Breach

In the history of Israel, God raised up "gap people" to stand in the breach and stay off the judgment. Moses and Phinehas were such men (Ps. 106:23, 30), as were Joseph (Ps. 105:17) and Samuel (1 Sam. 3). Had the people heeded the messages of Jeremiah, God would have spared them, but they refused to obey. Today, God needs "gap people" with the courage to stand for what is right, even if they must stand alone.

EZEKIEL 23

Because the Jewish nation was wedded to Jehovah, idolatry was the same as infidelity. They were giving themselves to foreign gods and committing harlotry and adultery. That is why God brought judgment on His people.

Oholah ("her tent") represents Samaria, the northern kingdom; and Oholibah ("My tent is in her") represents the southern kingdom of Judah. The Samaritans had devised their own religion, but God dwelt in Judah because of His covenant with David. What they did in His temple grieved Him greatly

(vv. 36–39; 1 Cor. 6:19–20). God judged Samaria in 722 B.C. when He permitted Assyria to take them captive, but Judah did not profit from that lesson. Judah persisted in sin, so God had to judge them.

When God judges sin in others, never say, "That will never happen to me! I can get away with my sin!" God waits for us to repent, and we must not try His patience (Eccles. 8:11). In the end, our sins punish us, and we learn afresh that He is the Lord (v. 49). God wants single-hearted devotion from His bride (2 Cor. 11:1–4; James 4:1–10).

EZEKIEL 24

The death of a city. Ezekiel was far away in Babylon, yet he knew what was happening in Jerusalem (Amos 3:7; John 15:15). The parable of the pot (11:3) revealed the city's wickedness. As the fire of judgment grew hotter, only the scum appeared, and then the pot and everything in it were destroyed. The date was January 15, 588 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar began the siege of Jerusalem.

The death of a wife. During his years of ministry, Ezekiel had paid a price to "act out" some of his sermons (chap. 12), but none was as costly as this one. The life you live is the greatest sermon you can ever preach. The city of Jerusalem was the delight of the Jews, but she would be buried—*and that was what the nation deserved.* Ezekiel told the people in the morning that his wife would die, just as he had told them for years that their beloved city would be destroyed; in the evening, his words came true.

If the people wanted to mourn at all, they should have mourned over their sins and not over the loss of their city and temple. But it was too late. They should have heeded this advice: "Seek the Lord while He may be found" (Isa. 55:6).

EZEKIEL 25

God's judgment begins with God's people (Ezek. 9:6). If *they* are judged for their sins, what will happen to those who do not know the Lord (1 Pet. 4:17–18)?

In chapters 25—32, Ezekiel described God's judgment of the gentile nations surrounding Judah. The Jews had sinned

against God's love and law, but the gentile nations had sinned against God's people. Note the repetition of "because"; God's judgments are reasonable.

The Ammonites rejoiced at the fall of Judah and the captivity of the people (vv. 1–7), so God promised to destroy them. Moab (vv. 8–11) said that the Jews were like any other nation (20:32), which meant that Ammon had no reverence for Jehovah. He was just like the idols of the other nations! (See Ps. 115.)

The Edomites (vv. 12–14) actually helped the Babylonians instead of assisting the Jews, who were their relatives (Ps. 137:7; Obad. 11–14). The Philistines saw an opportunity to pay back an old debt and vent their hatred of God's people.

Although Judah sinned, they were still the people of God. God will not defend our sins, *but He will defend His people and allow no outsiders to touch us without His permission.* God's chastening is born out of His love, while man's revenge is born out of hatred. That is why David prayed as he did in 2 Samuel 24:14.

"Restore Such a One"

When other believers are experiencing God's chastening or are suffering the consequences of their sins, what is your attitude toward them? Do you pray for them and encourage them to seek the Lord and yield to His will, or do you add to their trials? Ponder Galatians 6:1–5, Hebrews 12:12–17, and Matthew 7:12.

EZEKIEL 26—28

The judgment of the proud and wealthy cities of Tyre and Sidon is the theme of these chapters, described in three vivid pictures.

The scraping of a rock (26). The city of Tyre seemed impregnable, but Nebuchadnezzar would besiege it and Alexander

the Great would wipe it off the face of the earth in 332 B.C. Tyre would become a bare rock, a place only for drying fishing nets (vv. 4, 14). What a rebuke to civic pride!

The sinking of a ship (27). Ezekiel described Tyre as a beautiful and costly ship, loaded with riches and growing wealthy as it did business with all the nations. But the ship would be broken and would sink, and all the merchants would lament the loss of their great wealth. What a rebuke to covetousness!

The dethroning of a king (28). The king of Tyre thought he was God, and his heart was lifted up with pride. Surely Satan was the cause of this (Gen. 3:5). In fact, God may have been addressing Satan in verses 11–19, for the description surely fits. Pride lifted him up, but God cast him down. What a rebuke to his feeble attempt to take the place of God!

EZEKIEL 29—32

These chapters focus on Egypt, the nation that the Jews trusted instead of trusting the Lord (Isa. 30:1–7; 31:1–3). Ezekiel detailed four illustrations of the coming judgment of Egypt.

The capturing of a monster (29). The king of Egypt thought he was a great monster, guarding his royal river; but God said he was only a weak reed in the river (29:6–7). God would capture the monster and show Pharaoh that He owned the Nile River and could do with it what He pleased. The Babylonians would come and plunder Egypt, and Pharaoh would not be able to stop them.

The breaking of arms (30). God would break Pharaoh's arm and not allow it to heal, but He would strengthen Nebuchadnezzar's arms and give him victory over Egypt and her many allies. No more would God's people turn to Egypt for help.

The cutting down of a great tree (31). This message was for Pharaoh, who thought his nation was indestructible. Assyria once had the same idea, but look what God did to her. God would rebuke Pharaoh's pride, cut down his nation, and cast it into hell (vv. 15, 17).

The trapping of animals (32). Egypt was strong and active like a young lion, but the nation would be caught in God's net

and go down into the Pit with all the other great nations of that era.

Remember that God is the King and rules among the nations as He pleases. What He does has one grand purpose: that the nations may know He is the Lord (29:6, 9; 30:8, 19, 26). When nations and rulers start to think they are gods, God has to remind them that He alone is the God of all the earth. Nebuchadnezzar himself had to learn that lesson (Dan. 4).

EZEKIEL 33

God warns (1–11). God had ordained Ezekiel to be a watchman (3:16ff.), but now the people were to ordain their own watchmen in each territory. The three key words are *sword, trumpet,* and *blood.* When you see the sword coming, blow the trumpet and warn the people; otherwise, their blood will be on your hands (Acts 20:26–27). (See Prov. 24:10–12.)

God is fair (12–20). Review chapter 18 where Ezekiel defended God's fairness in sending judgment to His people. This is a plea for repentance, for God wants each of us to have a broken and a contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). We should not judge God but allow Him to judge us. (See Mic. 7:18–19; Heb. 10:11–18.)

God judges (21–29). For seven years, the prophet had been silent except when delivering a message (3:26). His words about Jerusalem had been fulfilled, and he could engage in normal conversation again. But his first words had to do with the nation's sins! How could the people call God unfair when they were so guilty before the law of God?

God sees the heart (30–33). Imagine calling a watchman's warnings "a very lovely song"! They did not take God's Word seriously; if they had, they would have obeyed it (James 1:21–27). Complimenting the preacher is not the same as obeying the Master. (See Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:8–9.)

EZEKIEL 34

The watchman serves the people in times of danger, but the shepherd cares for them day after day; and we need both. The civil and religious leaders were expected to shepherd the nation by feeding them, uniting them, and protecting them from

enemies. But Israel's leaders exploited the flock in order to feed themselves, scattered the flock, and failed to protect the flock from danger. See Acts 20 for Paul's example of faithful shepherding.

One day God will seek His people and bring them back to their land, and He will be their shepherd. Note the "I will" statements in this message, and see what assurance they bring to hearts even today.

Today, Jesus Christ is the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20–21), and He cares for His own. He sends "showers of blessing" on the dry land and makes it into a garden (vv. 26, 29). What a difference it makes when the Lord is in control!

EZEKIEL 35

God announced blessing for Jacob, but He pronounced judgment on Edom, the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau (25:12–14). The Edomites were guilty of sins that are still practiced today.

Hatred (5). Their grudge went all the way back to Genesis 27, and they would not forgive and forget. How tragic that brothers could not dwell together in unity (Ps. 133)!

Grudges

Some people nurse a grudge the way a mother nurses a child: they love it, cherish it, and cannot live without it. But they forget that the child is growing and may one day turn on them and destroy them. A grudge against an enemy is a very expensive thing, no matter how much enjoyment you may get nursing it. Ponder Matthew 5:21–26, 43–48.

Anger and envy (11). When you hate others, you are envious of their blessings and angry when they succeed. The Edomites revealed their anger when they helped the Babylonians ravage Jerusalem (Obad. 10–14). Are you envious when

others succeed and glad when they fail? Then you may be carrying a grudge. Beware! The judgment you want to fall on your enemy may fall on you (v. 15)!

Pride (12). The Edomites boasted of their great security in the rocks (Obad. 1–4), but God would bring them down in humiliation (Jer. 49). God still resists the proud—whether in nations or individuals—but gives grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:5).

EZEKIEL 36

From this chapter on, the prophet focuses on reinhabiting the land, rebuilding the temple, and restoring the kingdom to the glory of God.

In His grace, God will bring the land from desolation to delight (vv. 33–36), and His people from dispersion to regathering (v. 24) and from defilement to cleansing (vv. 25–29). God will remove the disgrace of the people and bring great glory to His name (vv. 20–23). "I am for you!" says the Lord (v. 9); and "if God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

There is no future for those who persist in their sins, but those who confess and forsake their sins shall always find mercy with God (Prov. 28:13).

Confessing Sin

There is a difference between merely admitting *sin and* confessing *sin. When we have confessed our sins sincerely to the Lord, we despise them and forsake them; even their very memory upsets us (Ezek. 36:31; see also 6:9). If the memory of your sin is pleasant to you and you enjoy "tasting it" from time to time (Ps. 10:7), you have not really confessed it to the Lord. A false confession is worse than no confession at all.*

EZEKIEL 37

Resurrection (1–14). The nation seemed to be hopeless, like an army of skeletons in a desert. But God can give life through His Word (vv. 4, 7) and His Spirit (v. 14; the Hebrew word for "breath" also means "Spirit"). One day, the nation of Israel will be resurrected spiritually and will know their God.

Reconciliation (15–28). Not only will the dead nation receive life, but the divided nation will be united in a covenant of peace. There will be no more "Ephraim" and "Judah," but one nation with one king and one temple.

According to Ephesians 2, God is doing this today. He is raising lost sinners from the dead (Eph. 2:1–10) and reconciling Jews and Gentiles into one temple (Eph. 2:11–22). These spiritual miracles take place when you and I share the life-giving Word in the power of the Spirit of God.

The Breath of Life

The breath of God was breathed into man at creation (Gen. 2:7), into the Word when it was written (2 Tim. 3:16), and upon the disciples to empower them for ministry (John 20:22). It will one day sweep over God's chosen people and make them a new nation. Meanwhile, God longs to send the "wind of revival" to His church; and He will, if we honor His Word, pray, and depend on the Spirit of God.

EZEKIEL 38—39

God's people will have enemies until the very establishing of the kingdom. These two chapters describe a coalition of gentile nations in the latter days (38:16) as they attack Israel when she is at peace in her land (38:14). God will defeat the invaders with an earthquake (38:19–20), a storm (38:22), and

the confusion of the enemy so they start to kill each other (38:21).

Why does God do this? So that the nations will know that He is the Lord (39:6) and that His name is holy (39:7), and so that Israel will know that He is their God (39:21ff.). In punishing them, God hid His face (vv. 23–24); but now He will reveal Himself to them and they will receive His Spirit (v. 29).

The day will come for God's people when every enemy will be defeated, every sin washed away, and every believer sharing in the glorious reign of the Son of God. What a day that will be!

EZEKIEL 40—43

The city of Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed, the land had been taken over by the Babylonians, and the people had been scattered or exiled. It was not a time of good news. But Ezekiel did what God's people always must do in times of trial: he looked ahead to the glorious future God had planned. One day the scattered people would be regathered and the defiled people cleansed. The land would be restored to beauty and fruitfulness, and there would be a new city, a new temple, and a new priesthood serving the Lord in holiness.

This vision of a glorious land and temple was to be declared to the people (40:4) so that they would repent of their sins (43:10). We today do not understand the significance of all these details; however, Israel will understand them in that day, and their understanding will bring about a change in their lives.

The assurance of a glorious future helps to sustain God's people during the trials of life (John 17:22–24; 1 Pet. 1:1–9). It should also be a stimulus to holy living. (The word *holy* is used thirty-five times in chaps. 41—48.) For Christians, heaven is not simply a *destination;* it is a *motivation.* It should make a difference in your life today because you know you are going to heaven. Does it?

The temple will be a place of sacrifice and singing and a place where *God's glory will dwell* (43:1–5). Ezekiel had described how the glory left the old temple (11:22–23), and now he describes how the glory returns and fills the house (43:1–5;

44:4). The beauty and grandeur of the temple mean nothing if God is not present.

Today, the bodies of God's people are His temple (1 Cor. 6:19–20), and so is His church (Eph. 2:19–22). Just as God has a beautiful plan for His future temple in Jerusalem, so He has a plan for His people individually (Eph. 2:10) and His church collectively. We are to be a holy temple, dedicated to Him alone; we are to radiate the glory of God.

EZEKIEL 44—46

Somebody must serve in the new temple, so God gave Ezekiel instructions concerning the Levites and priests and the manner of worship He wanted. Note the emphasis on the word *My:* My sanctuary, My food, My covenant, My holy things, My table, and so on. One reason the temple was destroyed is that the priests and Levites forgot it was the house of God, and they did in it whatever they pleased.

Future Sacrifices

Since Jesus Christ has fulfilled all the Old Testament sacrifices in Himself (Heb. 10:1–18), why will God reinstate them in the future temple worship? Certainly not for the purpose of dealing with sin, for Christ's sacrifice did that once and for all, and the blood of bulls and goats never did take away sin (Heb. 10:1–4). It seems that these future sacrifices, like the Lord's Supper today, will be memorials of what Jesus did. They will teach the Jews the meaning of their ancient religion in the light of the Cross.

What a privilege it is to minister for the Lord! You wonder why people would want to give their privileges to others, especially men who were not qualified (44:4–9). Never lose the won-

der of belonging to God and being asked to serve Him (Mal. 1:6—2:9). Such an attitude always leads to sin.

Unfaithfulness in service can lead to loss of privileges (44:10–14), but faithfulness can mean being able to draw near to serve the Lord (44:15ff.). The priests had to be careful what they wore, what they ate and drank and how they looked. How could they teach the people to have discernment (44:23) if they did not practice discernment?

The prince will worship only at the threshold of the gate and the people only at the entrance (46:2–3), but we have the great privilege today of entering into the presence of God (Heb. 10:19–25). However, like the prince, we should not return from worship as we came; things should be different because we have met with the Lord (46:9). And we must not forget the daily burnt offering (46:13; Rom. 12:1–2).

EZEKIEL 47—48

Depths (47:1–12). This river speaks of the healing and life-giving power of the Holy Spirit of God (cf. John 7:37–39; Zech. 14:8). No matter how deep you want to go into the things of God, the opportunity is there. It's tragic that too many linger in the shallows when they could be enjoying the depths.

Dimensions (47:13—48:34). God assigns our inheritance (Ps. 47:4), and He will keep His promise to Abraham (Gen. 13:14–17; 15:17–21) and give Israel their land.

Jehovah Jehovah-Shammah *is one of nine special names of God found in the Old Testament. The others are:* Jehovah-Jireh—*"the Lord will see to it" (Gen. 22:14);* Jehovah-Rophe—*"the Lord who heals" (Exod. 15:26);* Jehovah-Nissi—*"the Lord our Banner" (Exod. 17:15);* Jehovah-M'Kaddesh—*"the Lord who sanctifies" (Lev. 20:8);* Jehovah-Shalom—*"the Lord our peace" (Judg.*

6:24); Jehovah-Tsidkenu—*"the Lord our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6);* Jehovah-Rohi—*"the Lord my shepherd" (Ps. 23:1); and* Jehovah-Sebaoth—*"the Lord of hosts [armies]" (Ps. 46:7). The Lord is to us all that we need, no matter what that need may be.*

Distinction (48:35). The important thing about the land is not the river or the borders but the glorious presence of God. The new name for the city of Jerusalem will be *Jehovah-Shammah*—"the Lord is there!" The Lord had departed from Jerusalem because of the sins of the people, but He will return to dwell with them and bless them. When you are discouraged about the way things are going on earth, lift your eyes to heaven by pondering Revelation 21:1–8.

Just think of it: we shall live forever *where the Lord is!* Are you looking by faith for that future city (Heb. 11:13–16)?

DANIEL

When Nebuchadnezzar began his conquest of Judah in 605 B.C., he deported a number of Jews to Babylon, including Daniel and his friends, who were probably teenagers at the time. God blessed Daniel and gave him important places of service under four different rulers who represented three different kingdoms. When you read about Daniel, you meet a man of God who was faithful to the Lord and glorified Him in the enemy's land.

The emphasis in Daniel is on the sovereign will of God in the affairs of nations (4:25). In a series of dreams and visions, God showed Daniel the course of gentile history until the establishing of the promised kingdom on earth.

Chapters 1 and 6 are historical and reveal Daniel's godly integrity. Chapters 2—5 record his interpretations of the dreams and visions of *others;* in chapters 7—12, he receives his own visions from God and shares with us their meanings.

With Babylon's taking of Jerusalem, the "times of the Gentiles" began (Luke 21:24) and will continue until Christ returns to set up His glorious kingdom. God is in control of history and will work out His perfect plan. God also wants to have control in your life, as He did in Daniel's life; and He will—if, like Daniel, you determine in your heart to serve Him faithfully. Daniel was a man of personal integrity who had nothing to fear because he feared the Lord and served Him.

DANIEL 1

The world always wants the best (vv. 3–4), but these young men determined to give their best to the Lord. It is possible to serve the Lord even in Babylon. Think of Joseph in Egypt and

Esther in Persia. Don't complain about the place where God puts you. Ask Him to use you while you are there.

The world wants to change you and make you a "conformer," but God can help you become a "transformer" (Rom. 12:1–2). Daniel and his friends had a new home, strange new names, new teachings, and were even offered a new diet; but they kept the same heart's dedication to the Lord (Prov. 4:23).

God can give us favor in difficult places (v. 9). Daniel was courteous to his guards and did not create problems for them. He was following the counsel of Jeremiah (Jer. 29) and the example of Joseph (Gen. 39:4).

When everything in your life is upset and you find yourself in new circumstances that you cannot control, let the Lord take over and work out the plan He has in mind. If your heart is right with Him, His hand will work for you.

Dare to Be a Daniel

Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known!

Philip P. Bliss

DANIEL 2

Nebuchadnezzar could conquer empires, but he could not conquer his own anger (v. 12; 3:13, 19; Prov. 16:32). He understood how to defeat the enemy, but he could not understand the message of God. Daniel had patience and self-control and could explain the mysteries of God. A pure heart is better than a powerful throne.

Daniel and his friends knew the "God of heaven" who is merciful (v. 18), answers prayer (vv. 19–23; James 1:5), reveals secrets (v. 28), establishes rulers (v. 37), and will one day set up His kingdom (v. 44). Because the four men could come to God's throne, they had no fear of Nebuchadnezzar's throne.

When he explained the dream, Daniel gave the glory to God and shared the credit with his three friends. He also saved the lives of the king's wise men (the Chaldeans) when he could have exposed them as frauds. The presence of a believer can mean deliverance for unbelievers (Job 42:7–10; Acts 27:21–25), and we must be forgiving to our enemies. After all, we want to win them to the Savior.

Progress?

From the human point of view, the kingdoms of the world look like metal; but from the divine point of view, they are like beasts (Dan. 7). Note that the value of the metal decreases as history unfolds, until the nations end up a weak mixture of iron and clay (Dan. 2:41–43). God does not see "progress" in what man does; He sees only increasing weakness.

DANIEL 3

This event involves three kinds of people, all of whom are still in our world.

Conformers (1–7). Nebuchadnezzar was not content to be the "head of gold" (2:38); he wanted to be represented by a whole image of gold! The people were happy to conform to his desires as long as he spared their lives and gave them what they needed.

Informers (8–12). These were some of the Chaldeans whose lives Daniel and his friends had saved. Unsaved people do not always appreciate what believers do for them. These men wanted only to win the king's favor and get the high offices he had given to the three Jews (2:49).

Transformers (13–30; Rom. 12:1–2). The three men did not know for sure that God would deliver them; but even if He did not, they would still obey the Lord and not worship the king and his idol. Were they trusting Isaiah 41:10 and 43:2? The fire

brought them two blessings: the Lord came and walked with them, and they were set free from their bonds. Fellowship and freedom are often found in the midst of the furnace if you are committed to the Lord.

DANIEL 4

Nebuchadnezzar's second dream accomplished three things: it warned the king that his pride would lead to judgment (v. 37; Prov. 16:18); it exposed the incompetence of his magicians (vv. 6–7); and it gave Daniel another opportunity to glorify the God of heaven.

It was not easy for Daniel to give the king the message of the dream. Nebuchadnezzar had a short temper, and he might have ordered Daniel to be killed. Nathan had a similar situation when he had to confront David with his sins (2 Sam. 12). But when your ways please the Lord, you do not worry about your enemies (Prov. 16:7).

God gave the king a year's opportunity for repentance (v. 29), but he continued in his sins. Then God humbled him. The king learned his lesson, and when he was restored, he gave glory to God.

No matter what position we have in life, God gave it to us, and He is sovereign. When man tries to take the place of God, he becomes like a beast. God still resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (Prov. 3:34).

DANIEL 5

The events in this chapter occurred several years after those recorded in chapter 4. Belshazzar was coregent with his father Nabonidus, which explains why Daniel was named *third* ruler in the kingdom (v. 29).

The king may have been new, but the sin was old: pride and self-confidence. At that very hour, Darius was besieging the city; but so certain was Belshazzar of his defenses that he ridiculed Jehovah and praised the false gods of Babylon. It was Proverbs 16:7 over again.

God gave Nebuchadnezzar a year to repent, but He judged Belshazzar *that very night*. The king had not learned from

those who had gone before, and Daniel told him so (vv. 17–23). But it was too late!

The self-confident sinner had better beware (Luke 11:16–21), and so should a proud world that says, "peace and safety!" (1 Thess. 5:1–11). In Noah's day and in Abraham's day, judgment came when people least expected it (Luke 17:26–32). It will happen again.

DANIEL 6

Daniel faced three crises, and the Lord gave him victory in each one.

The work crisis (1–5). When the other officers heard that Daniel might be promoted, they were envious and wanted to get rid of him. The unbelieving world does not want a believer in charge, even if he or she is gifted and efficient. The light always reveals what happens in the darkness (Eph. 5:8–13).

The prayer crisis (6–17). The officers lied when they used the word *all,* for that gave the king the idea that Daniel agreed with them. But no laws or threats could keep Daniel from his times of prayer. Is prayer to you a matter of life and death? It was to Daniel!

The faith crisis (18–28). God did not keep Daniel *out of* the den; He protected him *in* the den. Why? Because Daniel had faith in the Lord (v. 23; Heb. 11:33) and was faithful to the Lord (Ps. 18:17–24). Perhaps Daniel meditated on Psalm 37:1–15 and Proverbs 11:8.

When the lions are about to attack, trust the Lord and claim His promises.

DANIEL 7

A vision of world history (1–8). Man views human kingdoms as valuable metals (chap. 2), but God sees them as vicious animals that fight and devour each other. Human history will culminate in a worldwide kingdom under a satanic world ruler (Antichrist) who will defy God and eventually be defeated by God's Son.

A vision of heaven (9–14). While the beasts are fighting on earth, God is holding court in heaven, and everything is under

His control. Jesus Christ will one day establish a righteous kingdom that nobody will overthrow.

Daniel's Vision

Daniel's vision in chapter 7 parallels what Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream (chap. 2). The lion (v. 4) is Babylon, the head of gold. The bear (v. 5) is Media-Persia, the arms and chest of silver. The leopard (v. 6) is Greece, the thigh of brass. The dreadful beast (v. 7) is Rome, the legs of iron. The little horn (v. 8) represents Antichrist and his kingdom, the toes of iron and clay. The Ancient of Days on the throne (vv. 9–14) parallels the smiting stone.

Bible Prophecy

How should believers respond when they get an understanding of God's prophetic Word? Daniel was affected physically by his visions and was left weak and prostrate (7:15, 28; 8:17–18, 27; 10:8). Those who are proud of a knowledge of Bible prophecy may have learned only what it says *and not what it* means. *Revelation always brings responsibility with it. If we really believe these things, we will obey what God tells us to do.*

A vision of saints on earth (15–28). These "saints" are believers during the end times, just before the Lord returns to set

up His kingdom. But what Daniel says about them has spiritual application to believers today. They are involved in a war (v. 21) and suffer persecution (v. 25), but they will receive the kingdom (v. 18) and reign with Christ (v. 27).

When the course of world history depresses you, look at events from heaven's point of view.

DANIEL 8

Daniel saw himself in the Persian capital, for Persia would be the next world power after Babylon. In this vision, God pictured Persia as a ram and Greece (the next power) as a male goat (vv. 19–22). We have moved from wild beasts to beasts that have been domesticated.

The "notable horn" (v. 5) is Alexander the Great, who conquered many nations, including Persia, and built a great kingdom. After his death, his kingdom was divided into four parts by four of his generals (v. 8). The "little horn" (vv. 9–14) represents the evil general, Antiochus Epiphanes, who invaded Palestine, defiled the Jewish temple, and put the Jews under bondage. He is a picture of the world ruler to come, the Antichrist (vv. 15–26).

Daniel was so overwhelmed by the vision that he became ill and could not do his work! He could never be the same again, knowing what God had planned for his people in the latter days. How does Bible prophecy affect you?

DANIEL 9

Insight (1–2). Even though he received visions from God and could interpret dreams, Daniel still read the Scriptures and sought to understand them. While pondering Jeremiah 25, he understood that the seventy years of Jewish captivity would soon end. Not all world events have prophetic significance, but God's people should keep their eyes open.

Intercession (3–19). The Word of God and prayer go together (Acts 6:4), as do prayer and fasting (Acts 13:3). Compare this prayer with the prayers in Nehemiah 9 and Ezra 9. Daniel emphasized the sinfulness of himself and his people and the righteousness of God, and he asked for God's forgiveness. Note that he especially prayed for Jerusalem. Had he read Jeremiah 29:10–14 and 30:10–24?

The Seventy Weeks

The seventy weeks are in three periods: seven weeks (49 years), sixty-two weeks (434 years), and one week (7 years). The first period starts in 444 B.C. with the decree allowing the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the city. The next sixty-two weeks (434 years) take us up to the time of Christ (vv. 24, 26). The "missing" seventieth week is fulfilled in the end times and parallels Revelation 6—19. The "prince who is to come" (v. 26) is the Antichrist, who will make a covenant with the Jews to protect them for seven years. After three and one-half years, he will break the covenant and usher in a terrible time of trouble for the world. That final seven-year period climaxes with the return of Christ, the defeat of His enemies, and the establishment of His kingdom on earth (Matt. 24:29–31; Rev. 19). The New Testament declares, "Known to God from eternity are all His works" (Acts 15:18).

Instruction (20–27). God gave Daniel a preview of Jewish history. Jerusalem would be rebuilt and the temple restored. Messiah would come and die. An evil prince would break his covenant with the Jews and trigger desolation. But God would triumph, and Jerusalem would become truly a holy city. Men are free to make decisions and even rebel against God if they want to, but He will accomplish His purposes in the world. With confidence, you can pray, "Thy kingdom come!"

DANIEL 10

The Jewish exiles had returned to the land and were rebuilding the temple when Daniel had this experience. He had been fasting for three weeks, and the vision of the angel left him even more weakened. When you pray for deeper experiences with the Lord, expect to pay a price.

God assures us. Daniel was a man "greatly beloved" by the Lord (vv. 11, 19). The Father loves us as He loves His Son (John 17:23) and wants to share His love with us (John 14:21–23). God also said, "Fear not" (vv. 12, 19). You can rest today in the love of God and His promise that you need not be afraid.

God touches us. God's touch awakened and aroused Daniel (v. 10), enabled him to speak (v. 16), and gave him strength (vv. 18–19). By His Word, God gives us the peace and power that we need (v. 19).

God instructs us. Why did it take so long for the angel to come to Daniel? Because of a spiritual battle in the heavenlies (vv. 12–13, 20; Eph. 6:10ff.). When you pray, you become a part of spiritual warfare, so do not take lightly your times of prayer. The angel also instructed Daniel about the future of his people (v. 14), explained in chapters 11—12.

Daniel's companions did not see the vision or hear the voice, but in terror fled away. God still needs people like Daniel who see the glory of God, hear the Word of God, feel God's touch, and enter into the spiritual battle.

DANIEL 11

God revealed to Daniel a summary of what would happen to his people now that they were restored as a nation. They would not have an easy time of it! The chapter describes wars involving armies from the north (Syria) and south (Egypt) as well as from Greece (vv. 3–4). The words *forces [arms], army, anger,* and *intrigue* describe the course of history. Have things changed much in the world?

At verse 36, the angel shifts to the latter days and describes the program of Antichrist. Read 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation 13.

What should God's people do in such times of conflict and destruction? They should be strong in the Lord, carry out dar-

ing deeds of faith, and share the truth with others, despite persecution and possible death (vv. 32–33). Bad times challenge good people.

DANIEL 12

Keep in mind that this prophecy has to do with the Jewish people in the end times. But it gives encouragement to all of God's people in every generation to know that God is in control and will accomplish His purposes in spite of the forces of evil.

God assures His servant that the living believers will be delivered (v. 1) and the ones who die will be resurrected to shine in glory (v. 2; Matt. 13:43). No matter what kind of affliction or tribulation God permits you to experience, He is still in control.

What, then, are your responsibilities? To seek to win others to the Savior (v. 3), to leave the hidden things with the Lord (vv. 8–9), to grow in holiness (v. 10), and to wait on the Lord and rest in Him (vv. 12–13). This is the way Bible prophecy should affect us personally.

THE MINOR PROPHETS

The prophets Jonah, Amos, and Hosea ministered in the northern kingdom (Israel, Ephraim) before it was taken by Assyria in 722 B.C. In the southern kingdom (Judah), Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Obadiah served prior to the Babylonian captivity. Ezekiel and Daniel, who are considered major prophets, ministered during the captivity; and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi ministered to the Jewish remnant after their return to the land from exile. Their messages are not "minor" as far as content is concerned; "minor" refers only to their size. Most of the minor prophets have a threefold message: the sin of the people; the coming judgment of God; and the future restoration of Israel. The promise of hope is present even in the message of judgment.

ing deeds of faith, and share the truth with others, despite persecution and possible death (vv. 32–33). Bad times challenge good people.

DANIEL 12

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HOSEA

Hosea preached in the northern kingdom when the nation was prospering outwardly but decaying inwardly and facing certain judgment. He is a master of imagery; as you read, notice the many comparisons he makes ("like a dry land," "like a morning cloud," etc.).

The overriding image in his book is that of *marriage*. Hosea married a woman who bore him three children and then deserted him and became a prostitute. He finally had to buy her back out of the slave market (3:1–2)! Hosea's painful experience was a sermon to the nation. Israel was married to Jehovah but committed "spiritual adultery" and turned to idols. That in turn led to moral decay in the nation. The nation would suffer for her sins, but the Lord would one day redeem her and restore her.

The development of the book is as follows: Hosea's marriage, (chaps. 1—3); Israel's sins, (chaps. 4—7); Israel's judgment (chaps. 8—10); and Israel's future restoration (chaps. 11—14).

It is easy for the church today to prostitute itself to the world and still claim to be faithful to the Lord (James 4:4–10). The warning of Revelation 2:4–5 must be heeded!

HOSEA 1

Gomer was not a harlot when Hosea married her, but God warned him that she would be unfaithful. Like Ezekiel, Hosea had to "live" his message before the people, and that was not an easy thing to do. Expect to pay a price if you want to have a ministry to others (2 Cor. 1:3–11).

The names of the three children summarize the spiritual history of Israel. *Jezreel* means "God will sow" (2:22–23) and

refers to Jehu's slaughter of his enemies at Jezreel (2 Kings 9—10). He went too far in his zeal, and his descendants would suffer for it when Assyria would take the land. God's judgments come—no matter how long He seems to wait.

Lo-Ruhamah means "no mercy," which is the situation of Israel today (3:4). Although God is providentially guiding the Jewish nation, they are not enjoying God's mercies as before.

Lo-Ammi means "not my people" and speaks of God's temporary rejection of the nation because of their sins.

Jezreel

The Valley of Jezreel has been a battlefield for many different armies. Saul launched his last battle there (1 Sam. 29:1), and there Jehu destroyed the house of Ahab as well as some innocent people (2 Kings 9—10). When Assyria took Israel, they fought on the plain of Jezreel; and there God avenged the innocent blood shed by Jehu. But Hosea saw a new future for Jezreel (1:11—2:1). Israel and Judah would be united and restored to the land, and they would experience the blessing of God. God would "sow" them in the land (2:21–23) to bear fruit for the glory of God. Only God can give new meanings to old names and wipe out painful associations with old places. Even the Valley of Achor, where Achan died (Josh. 7:16–26), will become a door of hope (2:15).

Hosea closes with a great affirmation of hope (1:10—2:1)! God will gather His people, claim them once again, and show them mercy. The names of the children will be changed to "My People" and "Mercy." No matter how dark the day, God

promises us hope if we will return to Him in sincere repentance.

HOSEA 2—3

God makes four declarations.

I will not have mercy (2:1–8). Israel accepted God's gifts but used them to worship idols. Do we ever use our God-given resources for things that grieve Him? God withheld His mercy and allowed the nation to sink deeper into sin. What a tragedy!

I will punish her (2:9–13). He did this by taking away His blessings, especially the land's fruitfulness. The people were still outwardly worshiping God (2:11), but their hearts were with the idols.

I will allure her (2:14–20; 3:1–5). Just as Hosea reclaimed his wife, so God will one day reclaim His people, renew His "marriage vows," and restore His people to blessing (Jer. 3:1–20). This will occur in the latter days after Israel has suffered greatly at the hands of the Gentiles. There is hope!

I will sow her (2:21—3:5). *Jezreel* means "God will sow" (1:4–5) and refers to God's planting His people again in their land where He will love them and bless them. The names will be changed (2:23)!

Note the declaration from the unfaithful wife: "I will go and return to my first husband" (2:7; Luke 15:18). When we return to our first love (Rev. 2:4–5), we can enjoy the first blessings.

HOSEA 4—5

Ignorance (4:1–10). What you don't know *can* hurt you! The priests and prophets did not teach the Word or help the people know God. The religious services were popular, but the people were being destroyed for lack of true spiritual knowledge. It was only a religious routine (Matt. 15:1–9).

Idolatry (4:11–19). The key word here is *harlotry,* which is what idolatry really is. Like Hosea's wife Gomer, Israel had forsaken the true God and gone after idols. What is God's response? "Let him alone!" (4:17).

Indignation (5:1–15). Any faithful husband would be indignant if his wife defiled herself by unfaithfulness (v. 3). Instead

of pursuing Israel, God withdrew Himself and His blessings (5:6; 4:17) and let them reap what they had sown. But His judgment was at work: the water was gathering behind the dam (v. 10); the moth was silently destroying the fabric of society (v. 12); the rottenness in the bones would lead to death (vv. 12–13). Then the Assyrian lion would spring (v. 14) and the nation would be conquered.

God withdraws so that we may realize what we are missing and want Him to come back to us again (5:15). There is no reason to stumble (4:5; 5:5) or to be stubborn (4:16) when God will welcome us if we will sincerely seek Him.

HOSEA 6—7

Like the rain (6:1–3). When we come back to God, He brings the dawning of a new day with the refreshing showers. The God who chastens us also heals and revives us. Why do we delay? Because of what *we* are like!

Like a morning cloud and the dew (6:4–11). Israel's loyalty did not last but vanished like a cloud and evaporated like the dew. They brought sacrifices and engaged in religious services, but those activities made no difference in the way they lived. Their sacrifices were substitutes for obedience (1 Sam. 15:21–23; Amos 5:21–24).

Like an oven (7:1–7). The desire for sin can smolder like a fire in an oven and then blaze forth when the opportunity comes. If you have "burning desires," be sure that they are under God's control or they may destroy you.

Like a cake not turned (7:8–10). If the fire is not watched, it can burn the cake, and then the cake must be thrown away. The people were "half-baked": there was no depth to their religious experience. The nation was aging and did not realize it, and national death would come much sooner than the people realized.

Like a silly dove (7:11–12). In their foreign policy, the officials flitted between Egypt and Assyria, playing one against the other; eventually the nation was trapped. Instead of trusting the Lord and obeying His Word, they depended on politics and failed.

Like a deceitful bow (7:13–16). God could not depend on His people. They sinned against Him, lied to Him, and did not

profit from His discipline. He tried to straighten them out, but they preferred to be substandard. In the battle against evil, are you a weapon that God can depend on?

HOSEA 8

The trumpet was blown in Israel to warn of impending battle (Num. 10:9). In this case, Assyria was coming, and there would be no escape. Israel claimed to know God (v. 2) and yet disobeyed Him (Titus 1:16). They made kings and rulers without seeking God's will, and they made idols in defiance of the Lord. The famous calf of Samaria would be destroyed (1 Kings 12:28–30) when the eagle swooped down (v. 1) and the whirlwind came (v. 7). What seems a lovely soft wind today can become a storm tomorrow (Acts 27:13–15).

Israel had become like a piece of junk pottery on the trash heap (v. 8). They trusted the gentile nations to protect them but left God out of their plans (vv. 9–10). Israel multiplied altars (v. 11; 10:1) and Judah multiplied fortifications (v. 14), but neither could deliver from judgment. Israel would be taken by Assyria and Judah by Babylon, and God's judgment would fall on a sinful people.

When God blows the trumpet, we had better wake up and listen!

HOSEA 9—10

The name *Ephraim* means "twice fruitful," and Hosea used that fact as the basis for his message in these chapters. There would be no fruitfulness *in the harvest* (9:1–9) because poverty was coming and God would judge the land (Deut. 28:38–42). That would be the end of harvest joy (9:1). Ephraim would no longer be known as the fruitful land.

There would also be no more fruitfulness *in the home* (9:10–17). Why allow them to bear children who would only worship idols and then be murdered by the Assyrian invaders? The fruitful womb was always a blessing to the Jewish people (Pss. 127:3–5; 128:3–4), but now the miscarrying womb would be a blessing.

What was wrong with Israel? They tried to serve two masters (10:1–2), they lied to God (10:4), they worshiped idols (10:5–

6), and their hearts were hard and needed plowing up (10:12). They sowed the wrong seed in the wrong kind of soil and yet expected to reap the right harvest!

Have you pondered Galatians 6:7–8 lately?

HOSEA 11—12

These chapters form a history lesson that reveals the sins of the people as Hosea reviews the history of Israel and of Jacob.

Ingratitude (11:1–4). Israel took for granted their covenant relationship with the Lord, forgetting that He chose them (Deut. 7:6–11). In love He delivered a child from Egypt, carried him, fed him, and taught him to walk and work; and that child abandoned Him for idols. What ingratitude!

Hardness of heart (11:5–11). They followed their own plans and gave no thought to the will of God. When God rebuked them, they did not repent. The soil of their hearts was hard (10:12), but God's heart was tender toward them. He could not destroy them as He did the cities of the plain (Gen. 14:2, 8). No, one day He will call for them with a lion's roar, and they will come with trembling hearts.

Deceitfulness (11:12—12:6). Both Israel and Judah (the southern kingdom) are included in this message. The prophet reviews the history of Jacob their founder and sees his deceit in his descendants. Jacob tried to trip up Esau at birth (Gen. 25:26); he fought with God (Gen. 32:22–32); but he returned to Bethel and found God's blessing again (Gen. 35). The time had come for Israel and Judah to return to God and repent of their sins (12:6).

Boasting (12:7–14). "I have become rich!" was their boast, but it was an empty boast and just a lot of wind (12:1). Why? Because they made their money deceitfully by cheating the poor, and such wealth can never last. Read and ponder Revelation 3:14–22.

HOSEA 13—14

Ephraim had been a great tribe in Israel (Gen. 48:10–20). Now it would become like the clouds, the dew, the chaff, and

the smoke—*nothing* (13:3). But God would be to the people like a lion, a leopard, and a bear (13:7–8)!

God had saved them from Egypt and in the wilderness, and He could have saved them from Assyria; but they trusted their wealth, their kings, and their foreign policy. Now the east wind would dry them up (13:15), and the "twice fruitful" Ephraim would be fruitful no more.

But we can always heed God's loving call to repentance. If we return to Him, He will receive us (14:2–3), restore us (14:4), and revive us (14:5–9). The desert will become a fruitful garden where the roots go deep. Instead of ugliness, there will be beauty; instead of a stench, there will be fragrance. What a difference it makes when we obey Him!

God does not want our material sacrifices so much as the "sacrifices of our lips" (14:2; Heb. 13:15). He wants to hear words from our hearts that are honest and sincere, and He wants to see faith that depends on His mercy alone. Will you be a stumbling sinner (14:1, 9) or a forgiven sinner?

JOEL

The prophet Joel ministered in Judah at a time when drought and a plague of locusts had devastated the economy. He used the phrase "the day of the LORD" (1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14) to describe both their present calamity (1:1—2:27) and the future judgment that would come upon the whole world (2:28—3:21). God's "army" of locusts (2:11, 20, 25) was but a picture of a future army that would invade the land in the last days. Joel called the nation to repent (2:12–17) and promised that the Lord would forgive and bless them (2:18–27). He also promised blessings in the last days when Israel's tribulation would be ended (2:28–32; 3:18–21). God's message of judgment is not left without a promise of hope.

Campbell Morgan wrote, "It is always the day of the Lord." No matter what calamities may come to men and nations, He is always in control, and these calamities remind us of the greater judgment yet to come.

JOEL 1

The prophet gives us four instructions to follow when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, instructions that should be heeded by individuals and nations.

Hear (1–4). Listen to God's Word and let Him interpret events for you. God raises up people to encourage us to turn to Him for help.

Awake (5–7). When Joel looked at the dying vines and trees, he addressed the drinkers and told them to wake up and weep. But they should shed tears not because the wine is gone but because their sins have brought judgment on the land.

Lament (8–18). The fields, orchards, vineyards, flocks, and herds were all ruined; and Joel called for the farmers to la-

ment (v. 11) and for the priests to repent (vv. 13–14). It is time to seek the Lord!

Cry out (19–20). The prophet set the example by crying out to God for His mercy and help. Perhaps he claimed God's promise in 2 Chronicles 7:14. It is not enough for us to weep over the sad consequences of our sins; we must also weep over our sins.

JOEL 2

The trumpet of warning (1–11). The calamities that come to our lives should awaken us and remind us that the Lord is in control. The locusts were God's army (vv. 11, 20, 25), and the day was "the day of the LORD." This is a sobering truth, but it is also a comforting truth (2 Sam. 24:14). The Lord who wounds will also heal (Hos. 6:1).

Restoration

The Lord said, "So I will restore to you the years that the . . . locust has eaten" (Joel 2:25). God promised them bumper crops that would make up for all they had lost because of the drought and the locust plague. "Lost years can never be restored literally," said Charles Spurgeon. "Time once past is gone forever. . . . You cannot have back your time; but there is a strange and wonderful way in which God can give back to you the wasted blessings, the unripened fruits of years over which you mourned. The fruits of wasted years may yet be yours."

The trumpet of weeping (12–17). The prophet summoned the people to return to God with fasting and confession. Never be afraid to come to the Lord in honesty and humility because He is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kind-

ness" (v. 13). As you pray, think about magnifying the glory of God (v. 17) as well as escaping the suffering that sin causes.

The promise of blessing (18–32). God promised to remove their reproach and restore His blessings to the land. "Monstrous things" (v. 20) will be replaced by "marvelous things" from the Lord (v. 21), and joy will take the place of fear. Verses 28–32 refer especially to the future day of the Lord, but Peter's use of them at Pentecost (Acts 2:16–21) suggests that they have a spiritual application today.

JOEL 3

Four vivid pictures describe God's future dealings with His people and the nations.

The court (1–8). In the last days, God will summon the gentile nations to court and judge them for the sins they have committed against Israel: scattering them, dividing up their land, treating them like slaves, and robbing them of wealth. This judgment has been long in coming, but it will come.

The harvest (9–13). God will call the nations to conflict and reap a final harvest (Isa. 63:1–6; Rev. 14:14–20). But His people will be strong, and God will uphold their cause.

The storm (14–17). The nations will feel the wrath of God, but He will care for His people with shelter and with strength. (See Pss. 46; 91.)

The garden (18–21). The book opens with drought and famine but closes with a description of a land of milk and honey. God will forgive His people and graciously dwell with them. He will give them a new beginning.

War, Not Peace

Joel 3:10 expresses the opposite thought from Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3. Isaiah and Micah describe the future glorious kingdom when the world will have peace instead of war. Joel's call was, "Prepare for war!" (3:9).

What the future holds for you depends on your relationship with the Lord. If you trust Jesus Christ as Savior, you will never be called into court (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1–4), and you never need fear the storm.

AMOS

The prophet Amos came from Judah, but his ministry was primarily to Israel, the northern kingdom. He was a herdsman/farmer (7:14–15), and his book contains many rural allusions. He did not have the formal training of a prophet but was called of God and effectively preached God's Word.

Under Jeroboam II, the northern kingdom was enjoying a time of peace and prosperity; interest in "religion" was high. But the "revival" was shallow and had little effect on the everyday life of the people. The rich were getting richer, and the poor had no one to defend them. Amos warned that God was sending judgment to Israel and the nations around her, and in 722 B.C., Assyria brought that judgment.

The book contains eight *accusations* against the nations (chaps. 1—2), three *messages* about the sins of Israel (chaps. 3—6), and five *visions* of future judgment (chaps. 7—9). The book ends with the promise of restoration for God's people (9:11–15; see also Acts 15:14–17).

The name *Amos* means "to be burdened" (2:13), and he certainly was burdened because of the sins of his people.

AMOS 1—2

Amos denounces the sins of six gentile nations before he pronounces judgment on Judah (2:4–5) and Israel (2:6–16). God did not give His law to the gentile nations, but He still held them accountable for their sins against humanity. Israel and Judah sinned against God's law (2:4) and God's love (2:9–12); but the Gentiles sinned against their "inner law," their conscience (Rom. 2:12–16).

The Gentiles sinned against their fellowman. Amos con-

demned their brutality, slavery, revenge, murder, and thievery. The nations seemed to get away with their sins but God eventually caught up with them. He is long-suffering, but He is also holy.

Being the chosen people of God, Israel and Judah had a greater responsibility before the Lord. In one way or another, they violated all the Ten Commandments; and that meant God would have to judge them (2:13–16).

If God judges *lost* people for their sins, what will He do to those who claim to know Him? Privilege brings responsibility (Luke 12:48), and where there is responsibility, there will be accountability. The people of Israel and Judah rejoiced when they heard Amos condemn their neighbors; but then he condemned *God's people* for their sins, and that was not acceptable to them.

Is God being long-suffering toward you? Is His judgment of others a warning to you? Are you heeding it?

AMOS 3

Past (1–2). This is another reminder that privilege brings responsibility. The Lord delivered the Jews from Egypt and called them to be His special people. *That was why He was punishing them.* God's gracious election of Israel did not give them the right to disobey Him, and the same truth applies to the church today. Election involves responsibility (John 15:16; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 2:4–5, 9).

Present (3–10). What right did a common herdsman like Amos have to denounce his own people and warn of judgment? He and God were walking together because they agreed (v. 3). God was roaring like a lion (1:2; vv. 4, 8) and setting the trap for sinners (v. 5). Amos was blowing the trumpet to warn people (v. 6) because God had shared His secrets with him (v. 7; Ps. 25:14). In spite of his humble origins, Amos was God's servant.

Future (11–15). If a shepherd lost an animal, he had to pay for it, unless he could prove that a beast killed it. He did that by bringing home some of the parts that were not devoured. Israel could hear the lion roar, but the nation would not repent. Soon, only a remnant would be left.

"Religion"

The prophet Amos denounced luxury and urged the people to care for the poor of the land. He particularly condemned their expensive houses (3:15; 5:11), their drinking (4:1), their complacency (6:1), and their costly parties (6:3–6; 8:10). The rich got their money by exploiting the poor (5:11–15). Yet those wealthy people were "religious" and faithfully participated in the temple services (4:4–5; 5:21–27). Their "religion" was only a masquerade to cover their sins. Are professed believers guilty of any of these sins today?

AMOS 4

"Yet you have not returned to Me!" is the sad refrain of this chapter (vv. 6, 8, 9, 10, 11). God's disciplines are for the purpose of restoration, to bring people to true repentance.

God used several means of discipline—drought, famine, crop diseases, locusts, plagues, war, and local catastrophes (v. 11)—and yet the people did not get the message. They had met with God's disciplines, but the next step was to *meet God Himself* (v. 12). He was personally coming to judge them.

What a tragedy that the people kept living in luxury (vv. 1–3) and carrying out their religious duties (vv. 4–5) while ignoring the call of God. It took courage for Amos to call the wealthy women "cows" and to picture them being led away to slaughter. In their comfort and prosperity, the people thought they were immune from judgment, but it came just the same.

Are you prepared to meet your God?

AMOS 5

Lamentation (1–3). This is a funeral dirge for a nation that was dead and left unburied. The Assyrians would come, and Israel would be taken captive. Israel thought she was a lovely virgin, but she was only a fallen corpse, left to rot. No wonder Amos wept!

Invitation (4–15). But God still gives His gracious invitation: "Seek Me and live" (vv. 4, 6, 14). The people flocked to their holy places with their sacrifices, but that would not save them. The nation would not listen to the Lord's servants (v. 10), so the Lord told them to be quiet (v. 13). God knows our sins, and yet in mercy He calls us to come to Him for cleansing. What a gracious God!

Jesus' Coming

When you pray, "Thy kingdom come," be sure that you mean it. Do you really want the Lord Jesus to return today, or will His coming upset your plans? Some of God's people will be ashamed when they meet Him (1 John 2:28), while others will welcome Him with joy (1 Thess. 2:19–20).

The joyful anticipation of His coming is a great motivation for holy living (1 John 3:1–3) and faithful service (Luke 12:35–48).

Condemnation (16–27). Amos saw the day of the Lord approaching, a day of judgment, darkness, and despair. The people had a false confidence that "the day of the LORD" would bring blessing to the nation (vv. 18–20), not unlike some believers today who think of the return of Christ only as an escape to heaven. God would send judgment in spite of their religious

activities and generous gifts of sacrifices (Isa. 1:12–23). God still wants obedience and not sacrifice.

Justice

Amos 5:24 is a key verse in the book. There was gross injustice in the land as the rich exploited the poor and the religious leaders did nothing about it. God wants justice to be like a mighty river that cleanses society of evil and refreshes everything it touches.

AMOS 6

The nation was guilty of complacency born of false confidence (vv. 1–2), trusting the military leaders and not the Lord. The people were also guilty of self-indulgence and unconcern for hurting persons of the land (vv. 3–8). After all, the day of judgment was far away! Or was it?

God appointed three judgments for them: death (vv. 9–10), destruction (vv. 11–13), and defeat (v. 14). The banqueters would become corpses, and the great houses would be left in ruins. The leaders boasted of their recent victories (v. 13), but Assyria would bring defeat.

Horses cannot safely run on the rocky cliffs, and oxen cannot plow there. But Israel was not as smart as the animals, for she was attempting the impossible: trying to escape judgment by disobeying the Lord. "We are an exception to the rule!" was the confident boast, but the people did not escape. Their sins found them out.

AMOS 7

Defending his people (1–9). The closing three chapters record five visions that describe the future of Israel. Eleven times the prophet refers to God as "the LORD God," the Sovereign Ruler over all things. After the first two visions, Amos

interceded for the people, and the Lord relented. But Amos did not intercede after the third vision, for the nation had been measured and was found wanting. God weighs us (Prov. 21:2; Dan. 5:27) and measures us by His standards, and His examination is always accurate.

Defending his ministry (10–17). Here is a conflict between two ministries—priest and prophet, the institutional and the radical. The priest seeks to conserve the past while the prophet threatens the present because he wants to preserve the future. There is also a conflict between structure and ministry. Amaziah was a man of position while Amos was a humble farmer with a commission from the Lord. But Amos did not back down; he remained true to his calling and let God deal with Amaziah.

If you were to choose either Amaziah or Amos to be your spiritual leader, which would you select—and why?

Called of God

Amos is a good example of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:26–29. God often bypasses the so-called great people and chooses to call and bless the humble and the weak. Yes, God can also use those who are gifted and who hold high positions in this world, but He is not limited to them. Both Moses (Acts 7:22) and Paul (Acts 26:24) were well-educated, but at least seven of our Lord's disciples were common fishermen (John 21:1–3). R. A. Torrey was a brilliant man and a gifted evangelist; he worked closely with evangelist Dwight L. Moody, who had very little education. God used both men in a remarkable way because both gave all they had to the Lord.

AMOS 8

Amos's fourth vision gave one clear message: "Israel is ripe for judgment!" As the farmer cuts off the ripe fruit, so God will cut off Israel. He had been long-suffering with them, but now the day of reckoning had come. The wealthy had sinned against both men and God. They were weary of their religious duties and only endured the Sabbath, waiting until they could start making money again. They changed God's standards so that they might exploit the poor, and they cheapened their products and then raised the prices. No wonder God was angry with them.

Amos told them to expect an earthquake (v. 8; 1:1), an eclipse (v. 9), a funeral (v. 10), and a famine (vv. 11–14). God's Word is our spiritual nourishment (Matt. 4:4; 1 Pet. 2:2), and there can be no substitute. When God's people reject His Word, He sometimes judges them by taking away His Word and leaving them to go hungry as they live on substitutes.

AMOS 9

Judging (1–4). Amos saw the Lord at the sanctuary at Bethel, where the people were carrying on their hypocritical worship. He was about to destroy the sanctuary and all the worshipers; nobody would escape. If anyone tried to escape, he would be tracked down and slain. It is a basic principle that judgment begins at the house of the Lord (1 Pet. 4:17; see also Ezek. 9:6).

Sifting (5–10). God would destroy the sanctuary at Bethel, but He would not utterly destroy His people. He would send them among the Gentiles and sift out the true from the false. In His grace, God spares a remnant so that the nation might continue.

Blessing (11–15). The royal dynasty of David was like a tent or booth that had fallen down, but God will raise it, repair it and restore it. His people will return to their land and enjoy once again the blessings of God (Isa. 11). Meanwhile, God is calling out His church from both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:6–21), and our task is to share the gospel with every creature.

OBADIAH

When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, the Edomites rejoiced and helped the enemy instead of helping their brethren (Gen. 25:21–26; Ps. 137:7–9). It was a repetition of the ancient conflict between Esau and Jacob, which symbolizes the battle between the flesh and the Spirit.

What were the sins of Edom? *Pride* stands at the top of the list, and God promised to bring them down (vv. 1–4). They were also guilty of *looting* (v. 13), and God said they would be looted (vv. 5–7). They were *violent* (v. 10) and *indifferent* (v. 11), and they *rejoiced* at the plight of the Jews (v. 12; Prov. 24:17–18); but God warned that they would one day be slaughtered (v. 8). What they had done to others would be done to them (v. 15), and there was no escape. (See Jer. 50:29, Matt. 7:12 and Gal. 6:7–8.)

But there is a bright future for Israel (vv. 17–21), for they shall "possess their possessions" (v. 17). Babylon burned the city of Jerusalem and the temple, but Israel will be a fire to burn the enemy: "And the kingdom shall be the LORD's" (v. 21)!

"The Other Side"

It is a cruel thing to stand "on the other side" when our brothers and sisters need our help. The priest and the Levite retreated to "the other side" instead of helping the wounded pilgrim (Luke 10:31–32). If it is in our power to help, we must do so (Prov. 24:11–12), and we must not substitute words for deeds (James 2:14–17; 1 John 3:16–19).

JONAH

The prophet Jonah was a real person and not just a character in a parable (2 Kings 14:25; Matt. 12:39–41). God sent him to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, to a people despised by the Jews. Jonah would rather that Nineveh be destroyed than that the city have an opportunity to repent and be spared. The Assyrians were a cruel people who showed no mercy to their enemies, and Jonah wanted them out of the way.

The book emphasizes God's grace both to Nineveh and to Jonah. Though Nineveh was a wicked city, God gave the inhabitants opportunity to be spared. Though Jonah was a rebellious servant, God forgave him, used him, and tenderly sought to help him overcome his anger. One outline of the book is the following: chapter 1—rebellion: Jonah goes down; chapter 2—repentance: Jonah goes up; chapter 3—restoration: Jonah goes to; and chapter 4—resentment: Jonah goes out.

The main character in this book is neither the prophet nor the great fish but *God,* who is mentioned thirty-eight times. The book deals with the important question, "How do you respond to the word and will of God?"

JONAH 1

Jonah thought he had a choice. He forgot that the will of God is not an option: it is an obligation and an opportunity. When we run from God's will, we always go down (vv. 3, 5, 15, 17; 2:6). We may end up sacrificing safety for danger and peace for a storm.

The "pagan" sailors reveal more character than does the prophet of God. While Jonah was sleeping, they were crying out to their gods, and they did their best to save him (v. 13).

Jonah was a Jew, and the Jews were to be a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3). But the man who should have been saving the lost was being saved by the lost!

A believer out of fellowship with God can cause a great deal of trouble. Jonah put the crew in danger and left the Ninevites without a message of hope. God loves us too much to let us run away; therefore, He disciplines us (Heb. 12:1–11), and He keeps working on us until we submit to Him.

"To fear God is to stand in awe of Him; to be afraid of God is to run away from Him."

Carroll E. Simcox

JONAH 2

When God first called him, Jonah should have prayed for divine help in carrying out his mission. Then he would have escaped discipline and the need for crying out to God for deliverance. When it was almost too late, the prophet prayed; and God graciously forgave him and rescued him.

The Old Testament Jew looked toward the temple in Jerusalem when he prayed (vv. 4, 7; Dan. 6:10). Perhaps Jonah claimed the promise of 1 Kings 8:46–53, just as today we claim the promise of 1 John 1:9. God is merciful toward His children and ready to forgive (Ps. 86:5).

How did Jonah get into all that trouble? He forgot God and neglected prayer (v. 7) and believed lies (v. 8). He learned the hard way that he could not escape God's will. But he was wise enough to run back to God and ask for forgiveness!

JONAH 3

How gracious God is to give us another opportunity after we have failed Him (Ps. 103:8–14)! God is as much concerned about the worker as He is the work. He could have sent somebody else to preach to Nineveh, but Jonah would have missed out on the lessons he needed to learn. God wants to work *in* us as well as *through* us.

How gracious God is to lost sinners! Why would a holy God give the vicious Ninevites an opportunity to repent? Because He is "not willing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9) but "desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4). Do you have a burden to share the gospel with a lost world that does not deserve to be saved? Remember, somebody shared it with you!

How gracious God is to bless the ministry of an imperfect servant! Jonah did not love the people he preached to, yet God used his message to bring the whole city to repentance. There is power in God's Word; it can convict and convert the greatest of sinners.

JONAH 4

If God wanted only to save the city of Nineveh, the book would have ended at chapter 3. But there was still more work to do, for God wanted to save His servant from himself. Jonah was an angry man (vv. 1, 2, 4, 9) who wanted to see Nineveh destroyed. Like the elder brother, he stayed outside and vented his bitterness (Luke 15:25–32).

The basic problem was that Jonah was not completely yielded to God. His mind knew God's truth, and his will obeyed God's orders; but he did not do the will of God "from the heart" (Eph. 6:6). He obeyed only because he was afraid of what God might do to him. His was not a ministry of love.

When we are angry with God, everything in life gets out of perspective, and we say and do selfish things. Things become more important than people, and comfort more important than ministry.

But God is long-suffering and tenderly deals with us to bring us to Himself. *It is essential in Christian service to be happy with the will of God.* Each of us should be able to say, "I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:8).

MICAH

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah (Isa. 1:1) and Hosea (Hos. 1:1) and prophesied concerning both Judah and Israel (Samaria). In this book, he gives us three messages, each introduced by a call to hear. He declared the coming judgment (chaps. 1—2), the future kingdom (chaps. 3—5), and God's invitation to the people to turn to the Lord (chaps. 6—7). He hoped that the people of Judah would learn from the sad experience of Israel, but they did not. His is a message of judgment mingled with mercy and hope. Micah's name means "who is like the Lord?" The prophet Jeremiah's life was saved by a quotation from Micah (Jer. 26:18; Mic. 3:12).

MICAH 1

The lawsuit (1–7). Micah convenes the court and announces Jehovah's verdict against Israel: judgment is coming! Assyria invaded the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. and made the capital city Samaria a heap of ruins. The nation's idolatry was but harlotry against the Lord, and unfaithfulness must be judged.

The lament (8–16). But the Assyrians would also invade Judah, which they did in 701 B.C., and would destroy nearly fifty villages. Although they tried, they could not conquer Jerusalem (Isa. 36—37), for the Lord spared it for David's sake (Isa. 37:35).

The prophet wept over the terrible things that would happen to the people. He did not say, "They are getting what they deserve!" Instead, he mourned like a man at a funeral. Does the certainty of coming judgment cause us to mourn over lost sinners and seek to win them to Christ?

Hebrew Wordplay

In the Hebrew original of Micah 1:10–16, the prophet uses some clever wordplay to get his point across. Beth Aphrah *means "house of dust."* Shaphir *means "beautiful."* Zaanan *means "going out," and* Beth Ezel *means "house of nearness."* Maroth *means "bitterness,"* Lachish *sounds like the word for "a team of horses,"* Achzib *means "a lie," and* Mareshah *means "an inheritance." Put these meanings with the prophet's statements about these towns and see what you discover.*

MICAH 2

Micah names some of the sins of the people, beginning with *covetousness* (vv. 1–5), which is idolatry (Col. 3:5). The rich were exploiting the poor and getting away with it. But when the invader comes, nobody's boundary lines would be respected.

Another sin was *rejecting God's Word* (vv. 6–11). The false prophets tried to silence Micah because he was announcing doom. They wanted a pleasant message about security and strong drink. The "prosperity preachers" are usually popular while those who declare God's Word are often persecuted. But God's Word does good in the lives of those who want to do good and obey the Lord.

They had *defiled the land* with their idolatry and harlotry (Lev. 18:24–30), and now the land would destroy them. Personal sin will always affect society.

How gracious of God to end with a promise of hope (vv. 12–13)! He will spare a remnant (4:7; 5:7–8; 7:18) and gather them together for His future kingdom. Their King will be their Shepherd!

MICAH 3

"Hear now!" introduces Micah's second message, which was directed to the leaders. Because of *their* sins, the nation disobeyed God and eventually had to be judged (Lam. 2:14; 4:13). He used three pictures to describe their sins.

Hunters (1–4). Instead of caring for the people, the leaders treated them like animals and devoured them. But the day would come when those leaders would cry out to God and He would not answer them.

Shepherds (5–7). Instead of guiding the flock in God's paths, they led them astray with their message of false peace (v. 11; Jer. 6:14). Their deception would be followed by darkness, and they would have no hope.

Builders (8–12). Instead of building the city on the law of the Lord, they broke the law and built with bloodshed. Why? Because they wanted to get more money (1 Tim. 6:9–10). But everything they built would be torn down, and their money would be useless to them.

A true leader protects the people, guides them in God's will, and serves without thought of personal gain.

MICAH 4

In four pictures, Micah presents a vision of the judgment of Israel's enemies and the establishment of the future kingdom.

A city (1–5). Even though Jerusalem would be destroyed by Babylon, one day the city would become the capital of the kingdom. It will be a time of peace when all men will want to learn about the Lord and walk in His ways.

A flock (6–8). The Lord will gather His flock (the remnant) and care for the lame and the afflicted. Their Shepherd will be their King, and He will reign in righteousness.

A birth (9–10). As the pregnant woman must deliver the child, so Judah must be taken captive to Babylon. It would be a time of pain, but it would eventually bring blessing. God promised to deliver them and restore them.

A harvest (11–13). The day will come when God's people will defeat their enemies who seek to destroy them. It will be like the threshing of grain, and the harvest will be given to the Lord.

MICAH 5

The focus is on Israel's Deliverer, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Two cities (1–2). Micah contrasts great Jerusalem, experiencing the Babylonian siege, and humble Bethlehem, where the Eternal One will step into time to save His people. The future of God's plan of salvation lay in lowly Bethlehem (Luke 2:1–20; see also Isa. 9:6).

Two births (3–4). The birth of Messiah brought hope to Israel, but the nation would not receive Him. He had to give them up (Luke 13:34–35) until the day He returns to restore them (Rom. 9). Their salvation will be the birth of a nation (Isa. 66:8), and there will be peace to the ends of the earth.

Two victories (5–15). Messiah will win a victory over His enemies and will make His people victorious (the lion) and fruitful (the dew). But He will also win a victory over His own people and purge them of their sins (vv. 10–15). The things they trusted will then be removed—armaments, fortresses, sorceries, and idols—and they will learn to trust the Lord.

Perhaps God wants to remove some things from your life so you can enjoy His peace.

MICAH 6

We are once more in the courtroom.

The indictment (1–5). God called the mountains to witness His complaint against Israel. What had He done to His people that they should despise His Word and sin against Him? (See Isa. 5.) Had they forgotten all that He did for them? It is good for us to review God's gracious acts toward us and make sure we express gratitude to Him.

The confession (6–8). All that the people could say was, "Guilty!" The Judge did not want sacrifices; He wanted obedience (Isa. 1:10–18). Verse 8 tells us how we should live as God's forgiven people (Deut. 10:12).

The sentence (9–16). They would feel the rod of punishment because of their sins, and their efforts would be cursed. Omri and Ahab were two of the most wicked kings who ever ruled Israel (1 Kings 16:21—22:40), and the nation suffered because they followed their bad examples.

The Judge is the Savior, but He cannot save those who persist in disobeying Him.

"Sublime Revelation"

Micah 6:8 is not the gospel. We are not saved by obeying these words, but we cannot obey them unless we are saved. Our religious words and deeds (vv. 6–8) mean nothing to God if we lack character wrought by the Holy Spirit as we yield to Him. "All controversy, all resentful intellectualism, all selfish calculation, all vicious political Christianity, must fall before that sublime revelation," wrote Joseph Parker.

MICAH 7

A faithful God (1–7). The prophet was disgusted because the people were all given over to deception. He couldn't even find one faithful man (1 Kings 19:10; Ps. 12:1; Isa. 57:1). When people fail you, remember that the Lord is always faithful. Make the same three decisions that the prophet made: "I will look, I will wait, I will pray" (v. 7).

A righteous God (8–13). God lifts up those who fall and gives light to those who are in the darkness. Even when He must deal with us because of our sins, He does what is best. Be patient, for He will one day defeat your enemies and bring you into blessing.

A pardoning God (14–20). God delights in mercy! When we come to Him and confess our sins, He pardons us, puts our sins underfoot like defeated enemies, and hurls them into the depths of the sea and they are seen no more. (See Ps. 103:12; Isa. 38:17; Jer. 31:34; Acts 3:19.)

God's Pardon

In wonder lost, with trembling joy,
We take the pardon of our God,
Pardon for sins of deepest dye,
A pardon bought with Jesus' blood.
Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?

Samuel Davies

NAHUM

Jonah was sent to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, to give the people an opportunity to repent. But Nahum was called to announce that their judgment was imminent. The city fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C. The prophet Zephaniah also prophesied the fall of Nineveh (Zeph. 2:13–14).

Nahum means "comfort," and his message was certainly a comfort to the Jews who feared and hated the cruel Assyrians' threats to their security. The book focuses on the holy character of God who cannot allow sin to go unpunished. In chapter 1, Nahum *declares* Nineveh's fall; in chapter 2, he *describes* it; and in chapter 3, he *defends* it.

NAHUM 1

God is jealous (1–2). This means He deserves total obedience and will not permit any rivals. It is the jealousy of the husband over his wife or the mother over her child. He is jealous over His people and for His glory; therefore, He must punish sin.

God is long-suffering (3a). God does not have "temper tantrums." He patiently waits for sinners to hear His Word and repent. See Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18 and Romans 9:22.

God is sovereign (3b–6). He has His way because His way is best and He is totally in control. He commands the forces of nature, and no one can stand before His anger.

God is good (7–15). Nineveh will be destroyed by a flood (v. 8) and a fire (v. 10); but God's people will be safe in their refuge, Jehovah God (Ps. 46). Judah had been afflicted by Assyria, but that would now end and the yoke would be taken off (vv. 12–13). Judah would hear the good news from the courier

that Nineveh had been destroyed! (See Isa. 40:9; 52:7; Rom. 10:15.)

NAHUM 2

What a dramatic picture of the invasion (vv. 1–4), the battle (vv. 5–7), the victory (vv. 8–10), and the humiliation of Nineveh before the Lord and her enemies (vv. 11–13)! It was not the Babylonians and the Medes who defeated Assyria; it was the Lord God of Israel (Isa. 10:5–19).

The watchmen on the walls see the enemy army approaching (v. 1) with their scarlet uniforms and shields and their swift chariots (vv. 3–4). The general puts his best troops on the wall, but they stumble over one another and cannot move fast enough (v. 5).

The invaders dam up a river and release the water, which destroys part of the city wall and the palace (v. 6; 1:8). The people start to flee, many are taken captive, and the city is pillaged (vv. 7–10).

Assyria was identified with the lion, an image in many of their sculptures (vv. 11–13). But the Assyrian lion would devour no longer, for it had been devoured! Assyria would roar no more and kill no more, but Judah would be restored and enjoy the blessing of God (v. 2).

NAHUM 3

The harlot (1–7). This image frequently occurs in Scripture for those who abandon truth and give themselves wholly to sin to gain wealth and pleasure. The Assyrian goddess of sex and war was Ishtar, a harlot. God would expose Assyria's shame and make her vile.

The drunkard (8–11). How could drunken soldiers hope to win a war! The nation had to drink God's cup of wrath (Jer. 25:15–29).

The fig tree (12–13). Ripe figs will fall easily when the tree is shaken, and these figs would fall right into the farmer's mouth! Nineveh's defenses were inadequate, and the city would fall right into the enemy's hands.

The locusts (14–17). Assyria had swarmed on other nations and stripped them, but now an army would swarm on them

and empty the city of people and wealth. The great Assyrian leaders would be like cold locusts in a stupor; but when the heat came, they would wake up and try to escape. The mighty nation was just a swarm of weak insects!

The flock (18). The shepherds (leaders) were dead, and the sheep were scattered. Nobody would care for them or gather them.

The victim (19). Wounded and sick, the nation was about to die; there was no way to bring healing. Jeremiah used the same image concerning God's people, but he promised that God would heal them (Jer. 30:12–17). For Nineveh, there was no promise of hope.

HABAKKUK

The name *Habakkuk* may come from a Hebrew word that means "to embrace." In his book, he comes to grips with some serious problems and lays hold of God by faith when everything in his life seems to be falling apart.

Habakkuk saw the impending Babylonian invasion, and he wondered that God would use a wicked nation to punish His chosen people. His book describes three stages in Habakkuk's experience—perplexity: faith wavers (chap. 1); perspective: faith watches (chap. 2); and perseverance: faith worships (chap. 3).

The key text is 2:4, "But the just shall live by his faith." It is quoted in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38. The theme of Romans is "the just" and how to be justified before God. Galatians tells us how the just "shall live," and the emphasis in Hebrews is on living "by faith." It takes three New Testament epistles to explain one Old Testament text!

HABAKKUK 1

An unanswered prayer (1–4). Habakkuk saw the wickedness of God's people in Judah and prayed for God to work, but the Lord didn't seem to hear. The prophet longed to see God bring revival to the land, but his prayer went unanswered—or so he thought.

An unexpected plan (5–11). God told His servant that his prayers would be answered in a way he never expected. God was going to bring Babylon against Judah and chasten His people. From the human point of view, the invasion of the land and the captivity of the people would seem a tragedy, but it was God's work just the same.

An unsolved problem (12–17). Now the prophet has a greater problem: how can a holy God use a wicked nation to

punish His chosen people? God seemed to hold His tongue as His servant cried out (v. 13), but soon the answer came. It was not the answer Habakkuk expected, but it finally brought him peace.

It is good to wrestle with God about the questions that perplex you—just be sure to stop talking long enough to listen.

"Do not rejoice in earthly reality, rejoice in Christ, rejoice in His word, rejoice in His law. . . . There will be peace and tranquillity in the Christian heart; but only as long as our faith is watchful; if, however, our faith sleeps, we are in danger."

St. Augustine

HABAKKUK 2

Habakkuk needed a right perspective on what God was doing in His world. Although it is good to pray about these things, it is also good to "be still and know that [He is] God" (Ps. 46:10). The Lord emphasized two truths about Himself.

God is just. The five "woes" made it clear that God knew the sins of His people and would deal with them in due time. He hates pride, greed, selfishness, murder, drunkenness, lust, and idolatry.

God is faithful. Three key verses (4, 14, 20) reveal this trait. You can trust Him because His character never changes and His Word never fails (v. 4). It may not seem that way now, but one day His glory will be revealed in all the earth (v. 14). Meanwhile, God is on His throne and has everything under control (v. 20). So, instead of looking around and asking God a lot of questions, *look up* and lay hold of His assurances.

HABAKKUK 3

Request (1–2). God said He was at work (1:5) so the prophet asked Him to keep on working (v. 2) but to be merciful to His

sinful people. Prayer means reminding God of His promises and claiming them for ourselves.

Review (3–15). Habakkuk reviewed God's work in the past and recalled His greatness and power. In every era of Jewish history, God was there to work for His people; He would not fail them now. The Babylonian invasion and captivity would be painful experiences, but God would use them for His glory and the good of His people (Rom. 8:28).

Rejoicing (16–18). Habakkuk started in the deep valley (chap. 1), then went up to the watchtower (chap. 2), but now finds himself on the mountains! Faith always lifts us higher and makes us happier. Even when we cannot rejoice in the economy, we can rejoice in the Lord!

Divine Guide

Begone unbelief, my Saviour is near,
And for my relief will surely appear;
By prayer let me wrestle and He will perform;
With Christ in the vessel, I smile at the storm.

Though dark be my way, since He is my guide
'Tis mine to obey, 'tis His to provide;
Though cisterns be broken and creatures all fail,
The word He hath spoken shall surely prevail.

John Newton

Glorious Feet

God wants His people to have bathed *feet (John 13:1–11) so we can fellowship with Him;* beautiful *feet (Rom. 10:15) so we can share His gospel with others; and* bounding *feet (Hab. 3:19) so we can overcome the obstacles of life.*

ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah may be the only Old Testament prophet who had royal blood in his veins. But his kinship with King Josiah didn't prevent his preaching a message of judgment at a time when the king was leading the nation in a religious reformation (2 Kings 22–23). Both Jeremiah and Zephaniah saw that the "reform" was not true revival, for it never got to the hearts of the people. It was only a surface change because the king promoted it and the people went along with whatever was popular.

The prophet's emphasis is on "the day of the LORD," a phrase we have met in Joel and Amos. It applies historically to the invasion of Babylon in 606 B.C., but prophetically it speaks of a future day of wrath in the end times.

Like Habakkuk, Zephaniah saw both the wrath and the mercy of God. He announced that judgment would come to Jerusalem and Judah (chap. 1) and to the gentile nations (chap. 2), but that God would be merciful to a remnant (chap. 3). In wrath, He would remember mercy (Hab. 3:2).

ZEPHANIAH 1

Preaching a message of judgment at a time of national religious reformation would not be easy; but a true prophet not only sees *farther*, he also sees *deeper*.

I will consume (1–7). God's wrath will consume His creation (vv. 2–3) and the hypocrites in the land (vv. 4–6). It will be a sacrificial feast, prepared for Babylon (v. 7; Jer. 46:10; Rev. 19:17–21).

I will punish (8–11). Starting at the royal palace, the prophet walked through the city and invited the people to la-

ment with him. The merchants would be especially grieved because their ill-gotten wealth would be seized.

I will search (12–13). The people of Jerusalem would try to hide, but the invading soldiers would find them and slay them. The complacent would discover that their theology was all wrong. What a rude awakening!

I will bring distress (14–18). Note the words that describe this day, among them: *bitter, trouble, devastation, darkness,* and *alarm*. People will be treated like refuse!

Behind the literal fire that destroyed Jerusalem was the fire of God's jealous love over His people (v. 18; Nah. 1:2). Because of that love, He accepts no rivals and permits no rebellion.

ZEPHANIAH 2

Because of their sins, the nations around Judah would also feel the wrath of God. The other prophets had warned them that judgment was coming (Isa. 14—20; Jer. 46—49; Amos 1—2), but the Gentiles did not repent. The prophet used several agricultural images to describe their coming judgment: like chaff (v. 2), like a tree uprooted (v. 4), "overrun with weeds" (v. 9), like a desert (v. 13).

God would punish their mistreatment of His people (v. 8; Gen. 12:1–3), their pride (v. 10), and their worship of false gods (v. 11). God still punishes these sins today.

In His mercy, God called the people to turn from their sins and seek the Lord (vv. 1–3). The meek ones (God's remnant; 3:12) would be hidden in God and cared for during the day of wrath (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9–10; Rev. 3:10). Are you among the humble or the haughty (v. 10)?

ZEPHANIAH 3

The rebellious (1–7). The leaders in Jerusalem would not listen to God's servants or heed God's warnings. When God corrected them, they only committed greater sin. The time had come for God to judge them. It does not pay to test the long-suffering of God or tempt Him.

The restored (8–13). The prophet looked ahead to the last days when the people would be regathered and restored to

their land. They would call on Him, serve Him, and have nothing to fear.

The rejoicing (14–20). The people will rejoice and sing because their discipline is ended, the enemy has been defeated, and the Lord is King over Israel. But the Lord will also sing (v. 17)! Like a loving Father, He takes His fearful children in His arms and quiets them with His love. Note the repeated "I will" promises that God gives.

If we delight in the Lord and obey Him, He delights in us and shares His best with us. If we sin, He will chasten us in love. If we turn to Him in repentance, He will forgive us and restore our joy and peace: "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely" (Hos. 14:4).

HAGGAI

In 538 B.C., about fifty thousand Jews left Babylon and returned to their homeland to rebuild the temple and restore the nation. In 536, they laid the foundation of the temple; but the work was stopped by their enemies and was not resumed until 520 under the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. (Review Ezra 1—6.)

The book is comprised of four messages that Haggai gave during a period of four months. His purpose was to get the workers back on the job and to keep them working until the temple was completed. His first message called them to *be honest* (1:1–15) and put God's house ahead of their own houses. Then he appealed to them to *be strong* (2:1–9), *be clean* (2:10–19), and *be encouraged* (2:20–23).

Whenever God's work is being neglected, the preaching of the Word gets things going again.

"*The test of a preacher is that his congregation goes away saying, not 'What a lovely sermon!' but, 'I will do something!'*"

Francis de Sales

HAGGAI 1

Priorities (1–4). If Haggai could have used a New Testament text for his sermon, it would have been Matthew 6:33. It is

never time to sacrifice to do the Lord's work, but it is *always* time to do things for ourselves.

Adversities (5–11). When we put God first, we have the promise of His care. But when we put self first, we lose His blessing *and* whatever we spent on ourselves! The people knew God's covenant with Israel. He promised to bless them if they obeyed His Word and to discipline them if they disobeyed (Lev. 26). You never lose when you put God first in your life.

Ministries (12–15). God used the Word to arouse the leaders and the people, and they began to rebuild the temple. Accomplishing God's work takes leaders and workers, both stirred by the Lord and walking in the fear of the Lord.

David asked, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Ps. 11:3). *Get to work and lay the foundations again!*

HAGGAI 2

Three messages are presented in this chapter.

Be strong! (1–9). The times were hard, the people were poor, and the leaders were discouraged. (Was there ever an *easy* building program?) The restored temple would be nothing like the temple of Solomon, and the people were wondering, "Is it really worth it all?" They did not realize that the Lord of glory Himself would minister in this temple! Beware that golden memories do not rob you of present opportunities.

Be clean! (10–19). The priests could not share holiness, but they could spread sin. The people had been defiled, and God could not bless them; but now they had returned to the Lord, and He promised them His blessing.

Be encouraged! (20–23). This was addressed to their governor who is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the latter days, God will overthrow the gentile powers and restore David's line, to which Zerubbabel belonged (Matt. 1:12). Perhaps the governor thought his work was unimportant because the temple was so ordinary, or because the nation was so small and weak; but he was part of the plan that would lead one day to the coming of the Messiah.

Your part in God's kingdom today is not insignificant or

unimportant, no matter how it appears to you. Be encouraged and keep working!

"Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb."

G. Campbell Morgan

ZECHARIAH

The prophet Zechariah ministered with Haggai as they encouraged the Jewish remnant to rebuild the temple. God gave Zechariah *eight visions* concerning Jerusalem and the Jews (chaps. 1—6) and *two burdens* (oracles) about the nation's future (chaps. 9—14). Chapters 7—8 deal with a question about fasting.

The focus is on Jerusalem, which is named over forty times in the book, and the key text is, "I am zealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with great zeal" (1:14). The city seemed to be forsaken, but God would remember His people and keep His promises. (*Zechariah* means "God remembers.") For God's people, the best is yet to come!

Haggai and Zechariah worked together, yet each ministry was unique. Haggai's book is brief and records no visions; Zechariah wrote a long book containing eight visions. Haggai focused on the present work of the people; Zechariah challenged them to look ahead. Both kinds of ministry were needed then to encourage God's people to work, and both are needed today. Like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, Zechariah was also a priest (1:1; Neh. 12:1–4, 16).

ZECHARIAH 1

God's anger was directed against three targets.

The previous generation (1–6). Their sins had helped to bring about the ruin of the nation, but the new generation was committing the same sins. Sin has a way of following us and finally overtaking us, like a wild beast let loose on our trail. It is always time to repent.

The present generation (12). During the seventy years of captivity, the nation felt God's anger; but now the time had

come for God to show mercy. His discipline had accomplished His purposes; now He would begin to heal and restore His people.

The complacent nations (7–21). God's angels patrol His earth and work on behalf of His people (Heb. 1:14). The nations were at peace, but Israel was still in difficulty. When God used the other nations to punish Israel, they were excessively cruel; now God would repay them. Horns are a symbol of power, and God would break the power of the nations.

The feeble remnant, working on the temple, must have been greatly encouraged by God's promise of mercy and help (vv. 14–17). Are you claiming His promises today?

ZECHARIAH 2

Promise (1–5). The act of measuring was an indication that God owned the city and had plans for it. No matter how discouraged the people of the Jewish remnant were, they could be sure that their work was not in vain. There was a glorious future for Jerusalem.

Proclamation (6–7). Many Jews still in Babylon should have returned to their land. Babylon was destined to fall (Jer. 50—51), but Jerusalem would have a new beginning. Why stay in a condemned city? But some believers today still choose to stay in the world (2 Cor. 6:14–18; Rev. 18:1–8).

Being Silent

God called the Jews to sing, but He told the nations to be silent (2:13). Why? Because He was about to pour out His wrath on them for their sins. It was the lull before the storm. (See Hab. 2:20; Zeph. 1:7.)

Protection (8–9). The Lord speaks and promises to care for His people. The pupil of the eye is vulnerable and feels pain keenly. God cares for us because we are dear to Him (Deut. 32:10; Ps. 17:8; Prov. 7:2).

Praise (10–12). Their sighing would be turned into singing, for the Lord was coming *to* them and would dwell *with* them. He will claim His inheritance (Exod. 19:5), and they will know Him and serve Him. The covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) will be fulfilled as the gentile nations come to the Lord because of the glory of God in Israel.

ZECHARIAH 3

When we come to God to be forgiven, what does He do for us?

He rebukes the enemy (1–2). Satan is the accuser (Rev. 12:10), but Christ is the Advocate (1 John 1:9—2:2). We are chosen by God and belong to Him, and the enemy cannot condemn us (Rom. 8:31–39). The Spirit convicts in love to woo us back to God. Satan accuses us in hatred to make us despair of God's help. Be sure to distinguish these two voices.

He removes the iniquity (3–5). The dirty garments symbolized the sinfulness of the nation, for the high priest was to keep himself clean before the Lord. God removes our sin and clothes us anew because Jesus died for our sins and lives to intercede for us.

He restores the ministry (6–10). God did not set Joshua aside, for the purpose of restoration is ministry. God told him to go back and minister to the people and tell them about the coming Messiah, the BRANCH. Just as Joshua was cleansed and restored, so Israel will be cleansed and restored when Messiah comes to reign (vv. 9–10; 12:10—13:1).

In the Words of Zechariah

In the prophecy of Zechariah, the Lord Jesus Christ is presented as the BRANCH (3:8; 6:12; Isa. 11:1), the Stone (3:9; 10:4; Isa. 28:16), the King (9:9; 14:9, 16–17), and the rejected Shepherd (11:12; 13:7).

ZECHARIAH 4

Zechariah ministered to discouraged people attempting to accomplish a difficult task. If you find yourself ready to quit, consider the assurances God gives His workers.

God provides power (1–6, 11–14). Oil is symbolic of God's Holy Spirit, and He alone can give us the power to finish His work. Are you depending on Him or on your own strength and expertise? Ponder Ephesians 3:20–21.

God removes obstacles (7). Unbelief makes mountains out of molehills, but faith in God makes mountains into plains! The leaders faced all kinds of obstacles, but God would open the way for them. (See Isa. 41:15; Matt. 17:20.)

God gives promises (9). God finishes what He starts (Phil. 1:6; Heb. 12:1–2), so we can trust Him even in the midst of opposition. The temple project was delayed for many years, but God eventually helped them finish it.

God rejoices over our work (10). To the eyes of men, the temple project was but a small thing (Hag. 2:3); but to the eyes of God, it was a source of great joy. Do your work to please God and let Him be the final judge (1 Cor. 4:5).

Small Things

God delights in using small things: Moses' rod (Exod. 4:2), David's sling (1 Sam. 17), a jawbone (Judg. 15:15), a hammer and a tent peg (Judg. 4:17–24), a piece of rope (Josh. 2:15–21), a basket (Acts 9:23–25), loaves and fish (John 6:9), a cup of cold water (Matt. 10:42), and even mud (John 9:6–7).

ZECHARIAH 5—6

Wickedness condemned (5:1–4). The scroll was fifteen feet by thirty feet, so it could easily be seen and read. God condemned the thieves and the liars. (Satan is both; John 8:44.)

These sins are violations of the third and the eighth commandments and are still condemned by God (Eph. 4:25–28).

Wickedness confined (5:5–11). In the end times, there will be a concentration of evil at Babylon, that last expression of the evil world system (Rev. 17—18). The word *wickedness* is feminine in Hebrew, which explains why a woman was used as the illustration.

Wickedness controlled (6:1–8). The vision parallels Zechariah 1:7–11 and reminds us that God's angelic servants patrol the earth. The Jews frequently were invaded from the north, but God was keeping those nations at rest so the remnant could build the temple.

Messianic Titles

"The BRANCH" is an important messianic title, signifying our Lord's coming from the stock of David (Isa. 11:1). As Branch, He is King (Jer. 23:5; 33:15), God's Servant (Zech. 3:8), "the Man whose name is the BRANCH" (Zech. 6:12), and "the Branch of the LORD" (Isa. 4:2). Some see in these four titles a parallel to the four Gospels. Matthew presents the Branch of David, the King; Mark, the Servant; Luke, the Man; and John, "the Branch of the Lord" who is God come in human flesh (John 20:30–31).

Wickedness conquered (6:9–15). Three Jews from Babylon came to Jerusalem with gold and silver for the temple. But God told Zechariah to make a crown and put it on Joshua and make him a king-priest! No Jewish priest had ever reigned as king, and no king was permitted to serve as a priest (2 Chron. 26:16–21). All of this was symbolic of the coming Messiah, the King-Priest (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:1–3) who would reign from the

future glorious temple (Ezek. 40ff.). Just as the three men brought gifts from afar, so the Gentiles would bring gifts to help build the future temple (Isa. 60:4–7).

As Haggai encouraged the people in their daily work, Zechariah urged them to live "in the future tense" and work because they were a part of God's glorious future. A "blessed hope" is a great motivation for service and faithfulness (Titus 2:11–15).

ZECHARIAH 7

While in Babylon, the Jews started a new tradition: fasting on the ninth day of the fifth month to commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem. But a remnant was now rebuilding the city and the temple, and the prophets said that an even greater city and temple were yet to come. Should this fast be continued?

There is nothing wrong with traditions that do not involve practices contrary to the Word of God. But it is good to examine these traditions from time to time just to make sure they are meaningful.

Are we doing this unto the Lord? Or is it just a ceremony that we endure regularly? If the Lord is left out, the tradition lacks both life and heart. (See Rom. 14:1–9.)

Does doing this help us serve others? The fast God wants is not an annual ceremony but a daily way of life. It means showing compassion and mercy and helping the poor and needy. God wants mercy, not sacrifice (Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Mic. 6:8; Matt. 15:1–9).

Does doing this make us obedient to His Word? The previous generation carried out their traditions but hardened their hearts to the Word of God. Are we doing the same thing?

ZECHARIAH 8

Zechariah is still answering the question about the fast, but he uses this opportunity to encourage the Jews in their work. "Do not fear!" (vv. 13, 15) is the emphasis of this brief message, and he gave them three promises to encourage them.

God will restore Jerusalem (1–8). He looked beyond that present day to the day when Messiah would come, establish His kingdom, and make Jerusalem a city of truth and peace. The old would sit safely in the sunny streets, and the children would play without fear.

God will prosper your work (9–17). The people had not been faithful to God, so He had withheld His blessing (Hag. 1:1–11); but now He would prosper their labors, bless them, and make them a blessing (1 Cor. 15:58).

God will turn fasting into feasting (18–23). In the future kingdom, there will be no need for fasting. The events of the past will be forgotten in the glory of the worship of the Lord. Jesus came to bring us joy, not sorrow (Matt. 9:14–17).

Traditions

The only fast God required of the Jews was on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29). The four fasts mentioned in Zechariah 8:19 commemorated (in order) the breaching of Jerusalem's walls, the burning of the temple, the assassination of Gedaliah (Jer. 41), and the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem. The nation was adept at developing new religious traditions, but it was not good at obeying the Word of God.

ZECHARIAH 9—14

Zechariah closes his book by giving two oracles (burdens) that focus on the future history of Israel.

Chapters 9—11 deal primarily with Christ's first coming when He presented Himself to His people (9:9) and was rejected (11:12). Events leading up to His coming include the conquests of Alexander the Great (9:1–8) and conflicts during the

time of the Maccabees, 168–134 B.C. (9:14–17). Daniel 8:9–14 also touches on this latter period. Israel under Roman rule is seen in chapter 11.

Chapters 12—14 highlight Messiah's second coming and the establishing of His glorious kingdom on earth. The key phrase is "in that day." Zechariah describes the events that will take place "in that day" when Christ returns to earth. When the nations gather together against Jerusalem, He will come in power and deliver His people. The nation will recognize Him, repent, and be cleansed; and Jesus Christ will reign as King from Jerusalem.

Symbolism appears often in chapters 9—14, and at times the prophet refers to our Lord's first and second advents in succeeding verses; but this is not unusual in prophetic literature (Isa. 9:6, for example). As you read, see Christ in His grace and glory, and rejoice in His promised victory.

ZECHARIAH 9

The spread of Alexander's kingdom (vv. 1–8) helped to prepare the way for the birth of the Lord Jesus. God controls history and uses it to accomplish His purposes. Events in the news today, depressing as they may seem, are all in the hands of God.

Verse 9 was fulfilled when Jesus rode into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1–11); verse 10 will not be fulfilled until He returns and sets up His kingdom. Israel rejected her own King and said (as people do today), "We have no king but Caesar!"

Verses 11–17 focus on the future deliverance of God's people. It will be like releasing prisoners from a pit (v. 11), gathering a scattered flock, putting jewels in a crown, and assembling a conquering army (vv. 16–17). What a glorious day that will be!

God appeals in verse 12 to the Jews still in Babylon, urging them to return to their people and their land. He promises twice as much blessing to those who will obey Him, so be sure you are in the place of His choosing.

ZECHARIAH 10—11

These two chapters portray Israel as God's flock and their leaders as shepherds.

The faithful Shepherd (chap. 10). The flock was in trouble because it had no shepherd care for it. But the Lord will return and be the Shepherd. He will rescue the people, strengthen them, and establish them in peace.

The false shepherds (11:1–14). The leaders were not true to God or their people, and God sent ruin (vv. 1–3). The flock was destined for slaughter (the Roman conquest in A.D. 70), division (the broken rod), and dispersion among the Gentiles. The prophet is a picture of the true Shepherd who cares for the flock, is rejected by the false shepherds, and is sold like a slave (vv. 12–13; Exod. 21:32; Matt. 26:14–16).

The foolish shepherd (11:15–17). This is the last world ruler, Antichrist, whom Israel will accept as their friend. He will agree to protect Israel but then will break his promise (Dan. 9:27). When you reject the true, it is much easier to accept the false (John 5:43). But God will strike the false shepherd and judge him (Rev. 19:11–21).

Jeremiah stated, "It is not in man who walks to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). We all need a shepherd, so be sure you follow the right one.

God's Strength

When God gives strength to His people, they become victorious. The sheep becomes a war horse (Zech. 10:3), and the worm becomes a threshing machine (Isa. 41:14–16). The feeblest person can be a hero like David (Zech. 12:8) when you go in the strength of the Lord.

ZECHARIAH 12

The phrase "in that day" used frequently in chapters 12—14 refers to the time of the end when "the day of the LORD" will climax with the return of Jesus Christ to the earth to defeat His enemies, deliver Israel, and establish His kingdom.

Jerusalem will be at the center of world attention. Note the

images of Jerusalem that the prophet used: a cup of strong wine that will make the nations drunk (v. 2); a heavy stone that will crush the nations (v. 3); and a firepan and torch that will devour the nations (v. 6). Those who attack Israel will only defeat themselves, for God has covenanted to protect Israel (Gen. 12:1–3).

When the people of Israel see the Messiah (v. 10), they will recognize Him (Matt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7), repent, and be cleansed and forgiven. Their sorrow will exceed the sorrow displayed at the tragic death of godly King Josiah (v. 11; 2 Chron. 35:20–27).

Like God's people Israel, we experience many trials and testings; but the Lord will see us through and share His kingdom and glory with us (Acts 14:22).

ZECHARIAH 13

The fountain (1–6). The defiled will be cleansed of sin (Jer. 31:31–34), and the deceived will have all their idols and false prophets removed. Verse 6 refers not to Jesus Christ but to a false prophet who has wounded his body in some religious ritual (1 Kings 18:28). He tries to prove that he is not a prophet because he wants to escape judgment.

The flock (7). To save His flock, the Good Shepherd must be smitten, and that means suffering and death (Isa. 53:4, 10; Matt. 26:31). The next time you are smitten because of your faith, remember that your Shepherd felt it before you did (Matt. 5:38–42; 10:16–26).

The furnace (8–9). Israel's terrible suffering at the close of the age will be like a refining furnace, separating the true from the false (Isa. 48:10). Suffering in the will of God can be a time of purification when we can bring glory to God (Job 23:10).

ZECHARIAH 14

The prophet describes the great campaign that we call the Battle of Armageddon (Rev. 14:17–20; 16:14–16), when the nations of the world will gather against Jerusalem.

See the demonstrations of His power! He will make changes in the heavens (vv. 6–7) and the earth (vv. 3–5), and will send a plague that will frighten and destroy the enemy

(vv. 12–15). He will cause a river to flow that will restore and refresh the land (Ezek. 47).

Zechariah proclaimed, "And the LORD shall be King over all the earth" (v. 9)! Our prayer "Thy kingdom come" will be answered, and we shall reign with Him (Rev. 5:10; 20:6). The nations will "worship the King" (vv. 16–17), and even ordinary items like harnesses and kitchen pots will be holy to the Lord. No outsiders will be there to defile God's holy temple (v. 21).

The Feast of Tabernacles was Israel's most joyful celebration (Lev. 23:33–44), so the kingdom age will be a time of holiness and happiness in worshiping and serving the Lord.

MALACHI

Ministering about four centuries before Christ, Malachi encountered the same religious situation described in Ezra 9—10 and Nehemiah 8—13. The people were backslidden, the priests were worldly, and the nation was far from God. The name *Malachi* means "my messenger" (2:7; 3:1).

Because the promised kingdom did not come immediately, the Jews questioned God's love (1:2) and justice (2:17) and complained about the way He was treating His chosen people. It was not long before the priests grew careless in their ministry, and the people followed their bad example.

The book may be outlined as follows:

1. God questions their love (1:1–5)
2. God condemns their sins (1:6—2:17)
   a) Despising His name (1:6–14)
   b) Profaning His covenant (2:1–17)
3. God seeks their repentance (3:1—4:6)

We know nothing about Malachi the person; he does not even tell us his father's name as prophets usually do. But after all, he was a messenger; the important thing about a messenger is the message. Malachi was concerned about being faithful, not being famous.

MALACHI 1

Six times the Lord refers to *His name* (vv. 6, 11, 14), which means His character and His reputation. He wants His name to be magnified in all the earth (v. 5). The priests, however, despised His name, and He rebuked them for it. How do we despise the Lord's name?

We show disrespect to His name by questioning His love

(vv. 1–5). The times were tough, and the people blamed the situation on God. But their own sins had created their problems (Hag. 1), and God was willing to bless if they were willing to repent.

We despise His name by doing His work in a careless manner (vv. 7–11). They were bored with their blessings, and doing the work of the Lord wearied them.

Along with that, we despise the Lord's name when we offer Him less than our best (vv. 12–14). They offered defective sacrifices, animals that they would never give as gifts to their friends. They even brought sacrifices that were stolen! "I will not take what is yours for the LORD," said David, "nor offer burnt offerings with that which costs me nothing" (1 Chron. 21:24).

Beware when you get bored with your blessings and start taking for granted the privilege of ministry. God may take your privileges away from you.

MALACHI 2

The emphasis is on *covenants* (vv. 4, 5, 8, 10, 14); three are mentioned specifically.

The covenant with Levi (1–9). God gave the priesthood to the tribe of Levi and told them to teach and obey the law of the Lord. But they corrupted the covenant and disobeyed His Word, and God had to judge them by cursing their blessings. Their blessing of the people would turn out to be a curse (Num. 6:23–27), and Israel would bring trouble instead of blessing to the world (Deut. 28).

The covenant with Israel (10–12). This was made at Sinai when the nation was "married to Jehovah" (Exod. 19—20). But His bride was not faithful to Him because she committed adultery with false gods. Jeremiah warned about this (Jer. 2), and it is the underlying theme of the book of Hosea.

The covenant of marriage (13–17). The men were divorcing their wives and marrying foreign women (Exod. 34:10–17; Ezra 10), a sin that led even King Solomon into idolatry (1 Kings 11). The marriage covenant involves the husband and the wife *and God,* and He expects us to be faithful. The unfaithful husbands could weep and bring sacrifices (v. 13), but God would not accept them.

We expect God to be faithful to keep His word. Why do we think we have the privilege of not keeping our promises?

Blessings and Curses

God is able to turn curses into blessings (Neh. 13:2) and blessings into curses (Mal. 2:1–2). It is painful enough when God removes *His blessings from us; but when He turns those blessings into curses, the pain is terrible.*

The Extent of Sin

"Have we not all one Father?" (Mal. 2:10) does not mean that everybody is a child of God and therefore going to heaven. The context is Jewish: God created the nation and claimed Israel as His firstborn (Isa. 63:16; Exod. 4:22). When the Jewish men divorced their wives to marry heathen women, they were sinning not only against God but also against their brethren (1 Thess. 4:1–8).

MALACHI 3

Refining (1–5). As is often done in the prophetic Scriptures, events from our Lord's first advent (v. 1) are combined with events to take place at His second advent (vv. 2–5). The messenger was John the Baptist (Matt. 11:7–10) who prepared the way for the Lord (Isa. 40:3; John 1:23). When Christ comes as Judge, He will purify Israel, especially the priests, and will judge the sinners.

Returning (6–7). God does not change; therefore, He kept His covenant and did not destroy Israel, though she deserved it. The faithfulness of God sustains us (Lam. 3:22–24).

Robbing (8–15). Not only did the people bring the Lord defective sacrifices, but they failed to bring tithes and offerings commanded by the Law. Consequently, He cursed their blessings (2:2) and destroyed their crops. *When we rob God, we only rob ourselves.* We cannot keep anything that rightfully belongs to God.

Remembering (16–18). There is always a faithful remnant who fears the Lord, obeys Him, ponders His truth, and exercises spiritual discernment. God sees those people and keeps a record of their names. They are His jewels, and they will be spared in the coming day of judgment.

MALACHI 4

Burning (1). The day of the Lord will be a time of fierce judgment on the earth, and the wicked will be burned like stubble. The fire of God's jealousy will burn (Zeph. 1:18).

Fire

In Scripture, fire is often associated with judgment, for it is a symbol of the holy wrath of God. Fire consumed God's enemies (2 Kings 1) as well as His servants who disobeyed Him (Lev. 10:1–3). He has reserved the world for a judgment of fire (2 Pet. 3:10), and hell is compared to a lake of fire (Rev. 20:10, 14; 21:8) and a furnace of fire (Matt. 13:42, 50). Jesus often spoke of the fiery judgment that awaits those who do not trust Him (Matt. 5:22; 18:8–9; 25:41; Mark 9:44–48). When He returns to judge the world, He will come "in flaming fire" (2 Thess. 1:8). It behooves us to be ready and to share the Gospel with others.

Healing (2–3). "Sun of Righteousness" is a title for Jesus Christ (Ps. 84:11). He is to His people what the sun is to our galaxy: the center of all things and the source of life and light (John 1:4). The same Sun that brings burning to the lost will bring blessing to the saved.

Obeying (4–6). Malachi pointed back to the Law and commanded Israel to obey and be prepared for what God was going to do. Then he pointed ahead to the ministry of Elijah, which was fulfilled in a spiritual sense in John the Baptist (Luke 1:16–17; Matt. 17:10–13). It may be fulfilled literally if Elijah is one of the two witnesses described in Revelation 11:1–13.

The Old Testament ends with the awesome word *curse*. At the close of the New Testament, the promise is, "And there shall be no more curse" (Rev. 22:3). What made the difference? On the cross, Jesus Christ was made a curse for us (Gal. 3:13).

"Men are not in hell because God is angry with them: they are in wrath and darkness because they have done to the light, which infinitely flows forth from God, as that man does to the light of the sun who puts out his own eyes."

William Law

THE FOUR GOSPELS

The word *gospel* means "good news." It is the message that Jesus Christ forgives the sins of all who trust in Him (1 Cor. 15:1–11; Gal. 1:6–9). *Gospel* also refers to the first four books of the New Testament, which present the life and teachings of the Savior. Apart from Jesus Christ—who He is, what He taught, and what He did—there can be no good news for lost sinners (Acts 4:12).

The four Gospels are not biographies in the modern sense of the word nor do they tell us everything about Jesus (John 20:30–31). Led by the Spirit, the authors selected material that helped them accomplish their purpose for writing.

Matthew wrote primarily for the Jews and explained that Jesus Christ is the Messiah who fulfills the Old Testament prophecies. Mark directed his book to the Romans and pictured Jesus as the active Servant of the Lord. Luke wrote for the Greeks and presented Jesus as the perfect and compassionate Son of man. John had the whole world in mind when he wrote and presented Jesus as Son of God and Savior of the world.

The first three Gospels give a somewhat parallel account of the life of Jesus and therefore are called "synoptic Gospels." (The word *synoptic* means "to see together.") John's gospel, written much later, contains material that supplements the accounts by the synoptic writers. Each gospel is unique, and all four are needed to provide a well-rounded view of the life, teachings, and works of Jesus Christ.

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The Old Testament ends with the overcome word *curse*. At the Cross, Jesus Christ forgives the sins of all who trust in Him (1 Cor. 15:1-11; Gal. 1:6-9). Gospel also refers to the first four books of the New Testament, which present the life and teachings of the Savior. Apart from Jesus Christ—who He is; what He taught, and what He did—there can be no good news for lost sinners (Acts 4:12).

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MATTHEW

Matthew ("gift of God") was a Jewish tax collector who obeyed Christ's call and became one of the original twelve apostles (Matt. 9:9–13). His given name was Levi (Luke 5:27).

Writing especially for the Jews, Matthew proves that Jesus Christ is the Son of David, the Messiah, the rightful heir to David's throne. At least 129 Old Testament quotations and allusions appear in his gospel, and the word *kingdom* is found over fifty times. Matthew's gospel stands first in the New Testament as the perfect bridge between the old covenant and the new, Israel and the church, prophecy and fulfillment.

The King presented Himself to His people (chaps. 1—10), but the religious leaders resisted Him (chaps. 11—13). The King therefore withdrew from the crowds with His disciples to prepare them for His coming arrest and crucifixion (chaps. 14—20). He was rejected and crucified (chaps. 21—27), but He arose from the dead and commissioned His disciples to take His message to the whole world (chap. 28).

As you read Matthew's gospel, you will be impressed with the authority of Jesus Christ over disease, demons, circumstances, and even death. He has authority over our lives, and we should follow Him in obedience.

MATTHEW 1

A special book (1). The Old Testament is "the book of the genealogy of Adam" (Gen. 5:1), but the New Testament is "the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ." In fact, the genealogy of Jesus Christ is the last one given in the Bible, here and in Luke 3:23–28. The important thing is not your *first* birth but your *second* birth (John 3).

A special providence (2–17). What may be to some readers

a boring list of difficult names is actually the record of God's working throughout the ages to bring His Son to earth. God ruled and overruled and fulfilled His great promises. In the same way, He will keep His promises and send Jesus back again.

A special Child (18–25). The birth of Jesus was different from every other birth: He was conceived by the Spirit in Mary's womb and born with a sinless nature. He is "God with us," and He is also God *like us* because He took our nature and entered into human life and experience. What a wonderful Savior!

The Virgin Birth

The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is vital to the truth of the gospel (Isa. 7:14). Since Jesus Christ is God, He existed before Mary; therefore, He could not have been conceived as are other babies. He was not only born, *but He "came into the world" (John 18:37). He is both God and man, the sinless Lamb of God (1 Pet. 1:19). Matthew opens and closes his book with "God with us" (1:23; 28:20).*

MATTHEW 2

What were the responses to His birth?

Creation responded by putting a miraculous star in the heavens to tell the world a King had been born (Num. 24:17).

The Gentiles responded by worshiping Him and bringing Him gifts. Matthew shows early in his book that Jesus came to save Gentiles as well as Jews. The wise men were astrologer-scientists who studied the heavens. The star led them to the Scriptures, and the Scriptures led them to the Savior. (See Ps. 19.) God speaks to us in ways we can understand.

Herod responded with fear and deception. He wanted no new King to threaten his reign.

The chief priests and scribes gave the right information but the wrong response. They were only five miles away from the Messiah, yet they refused to go to see Him! What good is it to understand Bible prophecy if it doesn't make a difference in your life?

The Magi

The wise men (Magi) were scientists, yet they saw no conflict between science and Scripture or between searching for truth and worshiping the Savior. Devout Christians can worship the Lord with the mind as well as the heart (Matt. 22:37). "Science without religion is lame," said Albert Einstein. "Religion without science is blind."

MATTHEW 3

John the Baptist was a model preacher. He was a *road builder* who prepared the way for the Lord (v. 3; Isa. 40:3), and an *axman* who got to the root of sin and exposed it (v. 10). He was not intimidated by people, nor was he afraid to preach about judgment (v. 12). He was obedient to his Lord and magnified Him in all things (John 3:30).

Some people heard God's Word and confessed their sins (vv. 5–6), while others heard it and covered their sins (vv. 7–9; Prov. 28:13). The first group became children of God, but the second group were children of the devil (v. 7; John 8:44).

Jesus is the Son of God. The Scriptures (v. 3), John the Baptist (v. 11), the Holy Spirit (v. 16), and the Father (v. 17) attested to that truth.

Significance of Baptism

Jesus was not baptized to confess any sins (v. 5), since He was sinless. His baptism was His presentation to Israel (John 1:31) as well as a picture of His future baptism on the cross when "all the waves and billows" of judgment would go over Him (Matt. 20:22; Ps. 42:7). The baptism of John looked forward to the coming of Messiah (Acts 19:1–7). Christian baptism today looks back to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and witnesses of the believer's identification with Him (Col. 2:12; Acts 10:47–48).

MATTHEW 4

The Victor (1–11). Public ministry is built on private victory. Our Lord was not tempted so that God could examine Him, for the Father had already approved Him (3:17). He was tempted for our sake, that He might personally know temptation and be able to help us when we are tempted (Heb. 2:17–18; 4:15). He overcame the devil by using the same weapons available to us today: the Word of God ("It is written"), the power of the Spirit (v. 1; Luke 4:1), and prayer (Luke 3:21; 1 Cor. 10:13).

The Master (12–22). Having defeated "the strong man," Jesus now invaded his house and began to spoil his goods (12:24–30). He both obeyed the Word (vv. 15–16; Isa. 9:1–2) and preached it, calling men to become His disciples. Everyone must decide whether to follow Christ or make bargains with the devil (vv. 8–10). What is *your* decision?

The Healer (23–25). Our Lord's main ministry was teaching and preaching, but His compassion moved Him to minister to the physical needs of the people. How tragic that most of the people who followed Him wanted His services but not His sal-

vation, the gifts but not the Giver; and these people are with us today.

"Let no man think himself to be holy because he is not tempted, for the holiest and highest in life have the most temptations. How much higher the hill is, so much is the wind there greater; so, how much higher the life is, so much the stronger is the temptation of the enemy."

John Wycliffe

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Sermon on the Mount was our Lord's "ordination sermon" for His apostles (Luke 6:12ff.). The theme is God's righteousness as contrasted with the hypocritical righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5:17–20; Matt. 23). The sermon is not a second Law with new commandments. It goes much deeper than the Law because it deals with internal attitudes as well as outward actions. It presents a picture of the truly righteous person and shows the spiritual principles that control his or her life.

Jesus opened the sermon with a description of the truly righteous person (5:1–16). Then He defined what sin is (5:21–48) and what real righteousness is in the areas of worship (6:1–18) and wealth (6:19–34). He concluded with warnings against making hypocritical judgments (7:1–12), following false prophets (7:13–20), and failing to obey God's will (7:21–29).

You are not saved by trying to obey the Sermon on the Mount any more than you are saved by trying to keep the Ten Commandments. Because they involve inner attitudes, the demands of the Sermon on the Mount are much more difficult than those found in the law of Moses. Only the true believer in Jesus Christ can put the Sermon on the Mount into practice (Rom. 8:1–4).

MATTHEW 5

Citizens (1–12). We enter the kingdom through the new birth (John 3:1–16), but we enjoy the kingdom by living for those things that please God the most (6:33). The world (and worldly believers) would disagree with Christ's description of a blessed (happy) person, but the description is true just the same. God majors on character, and so should we.

Salt and light (13–16). Tasteless salt and hidden light are good for nothing! Salt arrests decay in our world, and light banishes darkness. Salt is hidden, but light is visible. Both are needed in the world, and both must give of themselves in order to serve.

Worshipers (17–26). If you bring anger to the altar, you cannot worship God, so get rid of the anger quickly. Angry feelings lead to angry words and deeds, and the result could be murder. (See Eph. 4:25–32.)

Surgeons (27–32). Obviously Jesus is not suggesting literal surgery, for the real problem is in the heart (v. 28). This is a vivid reminder that sin is terrible, and we are better off "maimed" than whole and going to hell. Deal drastically with sin!

Children of the Father (33–48). "What do you do more than others?" (v. 47). We must measure ourselves not by others but by the Father (v. 48). This includes our words (vv. 33–37), our responses to injuries (vv. 38–42), and our dealings with our enemies (vv. 43–48).

"In taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior."

Francis Bacon

MATTHEW 6

Praise (1–4). We should give only to please God and receive His praise. If we give to win the praise of others, or to be able to compliment ourselves (v. 3), we get the *immediate* reward—

praise—but we lose the *eternal* reward. We cannot get our reward twice, so we must decide which one we want.

Prayer (5–15). Our public praying is only as good as our private praying, and our private praying should be secret (vv. 5–6), sincere (vv. 7–8), and systematic (vv. 9–13). The Lord's Prayer is a pattern for us to follow so that we will put God's concerns first and not forget to forgive others.

Possessions (16–34). We need *things* to live (v. 32), and God provides these things for us (v. 33); but acquiring things must not be the main goal of life. You are living for things when they capture your heart (vv. 19–21), divide your mind (vv. 22–23), and control your will (v. 24); and the result of this is *worry*. The solution is to put God first and start living with eternity's values in view.

Treasures in Heaven

We lay up treasures in heaven when we consider that all we have belongs to God and we use it to magnify His righteousness and advance His kingdom (Matt. 6:33). It means much more than merely giving offerings to God, although that is important. It means total stewardship of life so that God is in complete control and our one desire is to glorify Him. This is the secret of a unified life (Matt. 6:24) free of worry.

MATTHEW 7

Judges (1–12). One of the easiest ways to cover our sins is to judge others. It is not wrong to exercise discernment (v. 6), but we must start with ourselves. Often we are guilty of the sins we think we see in others (Rom. 2:1–3). We need prayer and love if we are to perform successful "eye surgery" on our brothers and sisters. We must treat them the way we want them to treat us.

Pilgrims (13–14). The gate into real life is narrow, and the way is difficult, so don't try to carry a lot of excess baggage. False teachers make the way easy and popular; if you truly follow Jesus, you pay a price and the way sometimes becomes lonely.

Trees (15–20). Life produces fruit, and good trees produce good fruit. There was a great deal of profession in the lives of the scribes and Pharisees, but no evidence of spiritual fruit.

Builders (21–29). To "build on the rock" means to obey the Word of God. *Saying* is not enough; there must be *doing* (James 1:22–25). If you claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, expect to have your profession tested in this life and the next. Fair-weather faith will not pass the test.

MATTHEW 8—9

In these two chapters, Matthew assembled several of our Lord's miracles and recorded them as proof that Jesus is the promised Messiah (1 Cor. 1:22; Isa. 35:4–6). In 8:17, he quoted Isaiah 53:4 and applied it to Christ's healing ministry while He was on earth. Some helpful lessons are evident in these miracles.

Growing in Your Faith

Some people have "no faith" (Mark 4:40), while others have "little faith" (Matt. 6:30). God wants us to have "great faith" (Matt. 8:10; 15:28). Faith is like a seed that grows if it is planted and cultivated in the heart (Matt. 17:20). The Word of God encourages faith (Rom. 10:17). As you exercise your faith in times of trial and testing, your faith grows and you glorify God (James 1:1–8; 1 Pet. 1:1–9). It is faith, not feeling, that gives the victory (1 John 5:1–5).

God is concerned with individuals. Jesus did not minister only to crowds (8:1; 9:36); He had time for individuals. He had compassion on people shunned by others. Peter and John had this same spirit: they ministered to thousands (Acts 2) and also took time for one beggar (Acts 3).

God can meet every need. Nothing is too hard for the Lord (Jer. 32:17). He can heal the sick and afflicted, calm the storm, cast out demons, and even raise the dead. Do you cast *every* care on Him (1 Pet. 5:7)?

Peter and Jesus

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law was the first of several miracles that Jesus performed especially for Peter. On two occasions, He enabled Peter to catch many fish (Luke 5:1–11; John 21:1–8), and He even helped him catch one fish with a coin in its mouth (Matt. 17:24–27). Jesus enabled Peter to walk on the water (Matt. 14:22–33). When Peter cut off the ear of Malchus, Jesus healed it (Luke 22:50–53); and He delivered Peter from prison and death (Acts 12). No wonder Peter wrote, "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7).

God responds to faith. The centurion had *great* faith (8:10), while the disciples were guilty of *little* faith (8:26). The men who brought their friend exercised *cooperative* faith (9:2), while the sick woman had almost *superstitious* faith (9:21). Christ asks you the same question He asked the two blind men: "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" (9:28). What is your reply?

God's greatest concern is the salvation of sinners. The healing of the sick is a great miracle, and the raising of the dead an even greater one; but the salvation of the lost soul is

the greatest miracle of all, Jesus is the Great Physician who came to heal sinners (9:12–13), the Bridegroom who invites sinners to the wedding feast (9:14–17), and the Good Shepherd who has compassion on the struggling sheep (9:35–36).

God calls us to help Him reach the lost. Peter opened his home and Jesus healed many there (8:14–16), and Matthew used his home to introduce his friends to Jesus (9:9–17). The blind men who were healed spread the news about Jesus to the whole country (9:31). Jesus is seeking disciples (8:18–22) and harvesters (9:37–38) to help Him get the job done.

MATTHEW 10

If you start to pray for laborers (9:38), beware: you may become an answer to your own prayer! You pray, and then you are sent out!

Some of these instructions applied mainly to the apostles (vv. 5–15) and some to those serving just before the Lord's return (vv. 16–23). However, spiritual principles are here for all God's servants.

Christ calls and equips. If the Lord calls you, He will equip you for the task He wants you to fulfill. It has well been said, "The will of God does not send you where the grace of God cannot keep you."

Christ does not promise an easy life. It is a wonderful privilege to be an ambassador for the King, but there is a price to pay. We are sheep among wolves (v. 16), sword-bearers (vv. 34–36), and cross-bearers (vv. 37–39). The world hates us because it hates Him (vv. 24–25; Phil. 3:10).

Christ wants us to give freely to others (8). The apostles had power to do miracles, but even giving a cup of cold water is service to the Lord (v. 42). Everything we have is a gift from God (John 3:27; 1 Cor. 4:7) and must be shared lovingly with others. We must live by faith and trust Him to provide.

Christ can take away all fear. If you fear God, you need fear nothing else (vv. 27–31; Ps. 112). You are precious to your Father, and He will care for you. God's servants are immortal until their work is done.

Review the chapter and mark the promises you need to claim today.

MATTHEW 11

John the Baptist was perplexed and perhaps discouraged. He had served God faithfully and yet was in prison. His work was ended, and he was not sure that Jesus was ministering in the right way. When you find yourself in a similar situation, do what John did: tell it to Jesus and wait for His word (vv. 4–6; Isa. 35:4–6). Isaiah 50:10 is a great promise to claim in dark days of disappointment.

John's disciples did not hear Jesus praise their leader. John was not a compromiser (a reed) or a celebrity; he was God's greatest prophet. John was in prison because of a cruel king and a crowd that was childish (vv. 16–19) instead of childlike (v. 25).

Leave the judgment to the Lord (vv. 20–24), and wait for Him to fulfill His perfect plan. You may think you have failed, but God will see to it that your work is blessed. In fact, John won people to Jesus long after he was dead and buried (John 10:40–42)! Surrender to Christ's loving yoke and you will experience His perfect rest (vv. 25–30).

MATTHEW 12

Hostility (1–8). The religious leaders were waiting for an opportunity to attack Jesus, and He deliberately gave it to them. What a tragedy to be burdened by legalism when you could enjoy the true Sabbath rest (11:28–30)! When Jesus is your Lord, all of life becomes a Sabbath and every place is God's temple, even a grain field.

Hypocrisy (9–14). The Pharisees were concerned about keeping the Sabbath but not about showing love to a man with a handicapping condition. Jesus wants mercy, not sacrifice (v. 7; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8). Do you *use* people or *serve* them?

Victory (15–32). Jesus is the Stronger Man who has invaded Satan's house, overcome him, taken his weapons, and is now claiming his spoils (Eph. 1:15–23; Col. 2:15). Put on the armor and join Him in victory (Eph. 6:10ff.).

Neutrality (43–50). Beware an empty life! It is a standing invitation for Satan to go to work. In the spiritual war being waged today, you cannot be neutral. You are either for Him or against Him.

The Unpardonable Sin

The unpardonable sin is committed by people who resist the work of the Spirit and reject His witness concerning Jesus. It is a sin of the heart, not the lips, because what we say comes from the heart (Matt. 12:33–37). When the religious leaders allowed John the Baptist to be arrested and slain, they sinned against God the Father who sent him. When they crucified Christ, they sinned against God the Son. Jesus asked for their forgiveness (Luke 23:34), and God gave them another chance. When they persecuted the apostles and then killed Stephen, they sinned against the Holy Spirit who was working through them (Acts 7:51). That sin against the Spirit brought about the downfall of the nation. God can forgive all sins except the sin of rejecting His Son (John 3:36). God's children cannot commit an unpardonable sin, for all of their sins were forgiven when they trusted Jesus Christ (John 3:18; Rom. 8:1; Col. 2:13).

MATTHEW 13

These parables explain how God is at work in the world today. The kingdom of heaven is not the true church, for the kingdom of heaven contains both true and false, saved and

lost. The kingdom of heaven is made up of all who profess any kind of allegiance to the King.

God is sowing His Word in human hearts and looking for fruit (vv. 1–9, 18–23). He is sowing His people in the world where they can produce a harvest (vv. 24–30, 36–43). At the end of the age, He will separate the true from the false and the good from the bad.

Is your profession of Christ authentic? Or will you be seen as a counterfeit at the end of the age? (See Matt. 7:21–29.)

Does your heart receive the Word? The seed has life and power and can produce a harvest of blessing in your life. Do you hear it?

Can God "plant you" where He wants you? You are a seed containing His divine life, but a seed must be planted to produce fruit (John 12:23–28).

Do you share with others what He teaches you (51–52)? Truth must not be hoarded; it must be shared so that others can be saved and built up in the faith.

Receive the Truth

The word parable *comes from a Greek word that means "to throw alongside." Jesus used the familiar to teach the unfamiliar ("things new and old" Matt. 13:52). He did that not to hide the truth but to arouse interest in the truth (Matt. 13:13–15). He wanted to get the people to open their eyes and ears and receive the truth into their sluggish hearts.*

MATTHEW 14

Tell it to Jesus (1–12). The disciples of John the Baptist were stunned, so they shared their grief with Jesus. Life will bring its disappointments, and you must learn how to handle them. Jesus will help you (Ps. 55:22; 1 Peter 5:7).

Bring it to Jesus (13–21). The Twelve said, "Send them

away!" But Jesus said, "Bring what you have to Me!" Give Him your all, and He will use it to meet the need. He can do the impossible with whatever is wholly given to Him. You can even bring to Him *people* who need His touch (v. 35).

Look to Jesus (22–33). Some storms come because of our disobedience, but this one came because they obeyed Jesus. Peter *did* walk on the water; but when distracted by dangers around him, he took his eyes off Jesus. We look to Jesus by faith when we trust His word (Heb. 12:1–3). Beware distractions!

"He is nigh when He seems absent. He is watching when He seems blind. He is active when He seems idle."

G. Campbell Morgan

MATTHEW 15

Our Lord's disciples never knew what would happen next! You can check your own responses to life's challenges as you consider how they handled three different situations.

Offended people (1–20). Jesus rejected the man-made traditions of the scribes and Pharisees because they focused on the outside and ignored the inner person. These men were plants that God did not plant (13:24–30) and blind guides who were leading people astray. "Let them alone!" was our Lord's counsel.

Persistent people (21–31). Again, the disciples were wrong. Jesus seemed to ignore the woman, but He wanted only to increase her faith. His delays are not His denials. Jesus was ministering in gentile territory, and the people "glorified the God of Israel" (v. 31).

Hungry people (32–39). The disciples had already forgotten the miracle of feeding the five thousand! When you are faced with a crisis, take time to review His past mercies; remind yourself that He does not change.

Try to respond to people today the way Jesus responded. Ask Him for discernment.

MATTHEW 16

Are you guilty of these misunderstandings?

About the times (1–4). People believe the weather report but not God's Word! They fail to see what God is doing in His world. Keep your eyes open, and ask God for wisdom to understand His plan.

About false doctrine (5–12). Jesus compared false doctrine to *yeast*. It appears small and insignificant, but it grows secretly and soon permeates everything (Gal. 5:9). The only remedy is to remove it (1 Cor. 5:6–7).

About Jesus Christ (13–20). The crowd is confused about Jesus; do not follow it. Instead, let the Father reveal the Savior to you (11:25–27), and confess Him before others. He is the Son of God.

Peter

The name Peter *means "a stone" (John 1:40–42). All of God's people are "living stones," but Jesus is the Rock (1 Pet. 2:4–8; Acts 4:11–12; Ps. 118:22), and His church is built on Him (1 Cor. 3:11). Whoever confesses faith in Christ becomes a living stone built into the spiritual temple (Eph. 2:19–22). Peter was given not the keys of heaven, for Jesus holds them (Rev. 1:18), but the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19). He had the privilege of opening "the door of faith" (Acts 14:27) to the Jews at Pentecost (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8:14ff.), and the Gentiles (Acts 10).*

About discipleship (21–28). In his misguided attempt to keep Jesus from suffering and dying, Peter the stone became Peter the stumbling block. Confessing Christ must lead to fol-

lowing Christ. The world encourages you to pamper yourself, but the Lord calls you to deny yourself. The only way to live is to die to self and follow Christ by faith.

MATTHEW 17

Listen to the King (1–13)! This event was a picture of the coming kingdom (16:27–28) and a proof that Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of the living God. The Law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) all converge in Him (Heb. 1:1–2). But the thing Peter remembered most was the emphasis on the unchanging Word of God (2 Pet. 1:16–21). The memory of visions will fade, but the Word endures forever. Hear Him!

Trust the King (14–21)! Jesus gave the disciples power to cast out demons (10:1, 8), but their unbelief and lack of prayer (vv. 20–21) robbed them of the power they needed. We cannot stay on the mountain of glory; there are needs to be met in the valley.

Obey the King (22–27)! The tax was an annual assessment of the Jewish men for the support of the temple (Exod. 30:11–16). Jesus affirmed His kingship by controlling a coin and a fish, but He affirmed His servanthood by submitting to their demands. "Lest we offend them" (v. 27) is a good principle when you lay aside your rights, but be careful not to set aside God's truth (15:12–14).

MATTHEW 18

Greatness (1–14). A child totally depends on others and must live by faith. An unspoiled child accepts his position in life, enjoys it, and does not try to act like someone older (Ps. 131). "He will be greatest who has the least idea he is great," wrote A. H. McNeile.

The way we treat children (including those who are "children in the faith") indicates how much humility we practice. Do we receive them (v. 5) or despise them (v. 10)? Do we imitate them (vv. 3–4) or cause them to stumble by our bad example (vv. 6–9)? It was a *sheep,* not a *lamb,* that went astray (vv. 10–14)!

Truthfulness (15–20). "Speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) is the secret of maintaining Christian fellowship. The

longer we resist, the more people we involve in the problem (Matt. 5:21–26). Humility and honesty must work together in producing harmony.

Forgiveness (21–35). Peter wanted a rule to obey, which shows he was not in the spirit of what Jesus taught (Rom. 12:8–10). The parable is not about salvation but about forgiveness among God's people. We are to forgive others because God has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13), *and He has forgiven us at great cost to Himself!* It is possible to *receive* forgiveness but not truly *experience* forgiveness in our hearts; therefore, we have a hard time *sharing* forgiveness with others.

When you have an unforgiving spirit, you put yourself in prison spiritually and emotionally; you pay dearly for the luxury of carrying a grudge. Is it worth it?

"He who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass."

George Herbert

MATTHEW 19

Let Jesus heal your marriage (1–12). Some practices are lawful but not biblical, so follow the principles given in Scripture. God's original plan was one man for one woman for all of life (Gen. 2:18–25), but He made a concession for Israel and permitted divorce (Deut. 24:1–4). Divorce is not given as the solution to the problem. It takes a change of heart for two people to make a new beginning, and only Jesus can change hearts. Before you run away, run to God and seek His help.

Let Jesus bless your family (13–15). Children want to come to Jesus (v. 14), but too often adults get in the way. The best parents make it easy for their children to come to Christ, love Him, and receive His blessing.

Let Jesus have your all (16–30). The wealthy young man had much in his favor, but he thought too highly of himself and was not really honest before God. Money stood between him

and salvation, and he would not repent and renounce his false god. You never lose when you give everything to Jesus. He blesses you in this life and in the life to come.

"A good marriage is not a contract between two persons but a sacred covenant between three. Too often Christ is never invited to the wedding and finds no room in the home."

Donald T. Kauffman

MATTHEW 20

What shall we have (19:27—20:16)? The parable is not about salvation, for we cannot work for salvation; nor is it about rewards, for we do not all receive the same reward. The story concerns the selfish attitude implicit in Peter's question. The key to the parable is that the first workers hired *demanded a contract and insisted on knowing how much they would get.* The other workers trusted the landowner. If you ask God for a contract, you will only rob yourself, for He is generous with His workers. Be faithful to do your job and avoid watching the other workers, and He will deal with you generously.

What do you wish (20:17–28)? Salome remembered His promise (19:28) and claimed it for her two sons. But she forgot what Jesus had just said about the cross (20:17–19). She should have known that the only way to glory is through suffering (1 Pet. 5:10). You do not *pray* for a throne; you *pay* for it. Beware selfish prayers: the Lord may answer them. James was the first apostle to be martyred (Acts 12:1–2), and John experienced great trial as a Roman prisoner (Rev. 1:9).

What do you want Me to do for you (20:29–34)? They knew what they wanted, and they trusted Him for it. Do you know what you want when you come to Him in prayer? Do you persist even if others try to discourage you? What a promise we have in Hebrews 4:16!

The Last Week

Traditionally, the events during our Lord's last week are as follows: Sunday—*He entered Jerusalem as King.* Monday—*He cleansed the temple and cursed the fig tree.* Tuesday—*He debated with the Jewish leaders and gave the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24—25).* Wednesday—*He rested.* Thursday—*He had the Last Supper; He was arrested in the Garden.* Friday—*He was crucified and buried.* Saturday—*He lay in the tomb.* Sunday—*He arose from the dead. Keep in mind that the Jewish day begins with sundown, so that their Friday begins Thursday evening.*

MATTHEW 21:1—22:14

The King (21:1–11). The people were blind to their Scriptures (Zech. 9:9). They praised Him with Psalm 118:26 but overlooked verses 22–23, which Jesus quoted later (v. 42). Beware knowing the Bible but not knowing the Lord when He is at work in your midst.

The Judge (21:12–22). Jesus cleansed the temple and cursed the fig tree, two "unusual acts" for Him who came not to judge but to save (Isa. 28:21). Like the temple, Israel was corrupt within; and like the fig tree, it was fruitless without. A church can become a "den of thieves" if that is where we go to cover up our sins (Isa. 56:7; 1:10–20; Jer. 7:11). A person whose life is "nothing but leaves" is in danger of judgment, for Christ seeks fruit (Matt. 7:15–20).

The Son (21:23–41). Jesus has authority because He is the Son of God! The vineyard is Israel (Isa. 5) whose leaders did not respect the Son when He came. The nation rejected the Father when they refused the witness of John, and now they were about to reject the Son.

The Stone (21:42–46). The Jewish leaders pronounced their own sentence. Jesus quoted Psalm 118:22–23 to prove that their sins would not hinder His victory (Isa. 8:14–15; Dan. 2:34; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:9). If only they had become like the children and praised the Lord instead of fighting Him (Matt. 21:15–16; Ps. 8:2)!

The Bridegroom (22:1–14). The rejected Son is resurrected and reigns in glory. He is the Bridegroom who wants everybody to come to His feast. Israel's rejection of the invitation led to the destruction of Jerusalem (v. 7). But the invitation is still open today. Just be sure not to wear your self-righteousness (Isa. 64:6); let Him provide the garment of His righteousness (Isa. 61:10; 2 Cor. 5:21).

MATTHEW 22:15–46

His enemies questioned Jesus, hoping to get Him in trouble with Rome. After Passover, they could have Him arrested and tried. But how can mortal man question God and hope to win (Job 38:1–3)? What arrogance—and what ignorance!

Jesus asked the key question: "Who is your Lord?" (vv. 41–46; Ps. 110). If Jesus Christ is your Lord, the other questions pose no problem. You will be a good citizen (vv. 15–22; Rom. 13); you will not worry about the hereafter (vv. 23–33); and you will love God and your neighbor (vv. 34–40).

People who like to argue usually lack humility and need to submit to Christ (Phil. 2:1–11). Although it is good to ponder the great questions of life, it is also good to admit our ignorance and to worship Christ "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3).

MATTHEW 23

The Word of God has authority even if the people who teach it lack integrity (vv. 1–3). Our Lord's standard is that we both *do* and *teach* His truth (5:17–20; 1 Thess. 2:10–12). Those who practice hypocrisy erode their character and do untold damage to others. The tragedy is that hypocrisy blinds people (vv. 16–19, 24, 26) so that they cannot see the Lord, themselves, or other people.

The God of the Pharisees is not the God of the Bible. He is a

rigorous Law Giver who pays back those who pay Him. He is not "the God of all grace" (1 Pet. 5:10) or the loving Father who cares for His children (Ps. 103:1–14).

The Pharisees were blind to themselves. *They* were right, and everybody else was wrong. Because they majored on the externals, they never saw the rottenness in their hearts (vv. 25–28). Because they majored on the minor details, they ignored the great principles of the Word (v. 23).

Hypocrites never see the damage done to others: closing doors of blessing (v. 13); defiling those who touch them (v. 27); giving people a wrong sense of values (vv. 16–22). No wonder Jesus wept! These "woes" were born of anguish, not anger; and perhaps He is weeping over you and me.

Hypocrisy

Failing to reach your goals or to be all that you want to be is not hypocrisy. Pretending that you have "arrived" is hypocrisy. The word hypocrite *comes from the Greek word for the mask worn by an actor. Hypocrites deliberately play a part so people will think they are more spiritual than they really are. The remedy for hypocrisy is honesty with yourself and with God (1 John 1:5–10).*

THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

Our Lord's words about the desolation of the temple (23:37–39) prompted the disciples to ask Him about the future of the city, the temple, and the nation. In 24:1–35, the theme is the Tribulation ("day of the Lord") that will come upon the world in the last days. Jesus explained the events of the first half of the tribulation (24:1–14) and the last half (24:15–28); and then He announced His return to earth after the Tribulation (24:29–35).

In 24:1–35, the emphasis is on *the signs of His coming to the earth* and is directed primarily to Israel (vv. 15–28), telling the

people to watch and be ready. But these words have a message for the church today, because "coming events cast their shadows before." We are looking for the Savior and not for signs (Phil. 3:20), because He can come at any time; but as we see these things developing in our world, we are encouraged to expect Him soon.

Matthew 24:36—25:46 focuses on the church rather than Israel. The emphasis is not on signs but on the fact that Jesus can return at any time (24:36, 44, 50). When He comes, He will reckon with His servants and reward those who have been faithful; it behooves us to be ready.

MATTHEW 24

When you listen to the news and see the tensions and troubles in today's world, keep in mind the warnings that the Lord gave.

Do not be deceived (4, 11). People will make grandiose claims and promises and will deceive many. You have the Word of God to enlighten you (Isa. 8:20) and the Holy Spirit to teach you (John 16:13–15), so you should not go astray (1 John 2:18–29).

Do not be discouraged (6). Political and natural disturbances have always been a part of world history, so do not allow them to discourage you. They are "the beginning of sorrows" (v. 8). The word translated "sorrows" means "birth-pangs." The world's troubles are pregnant with possibilities! God is still on the throne!

Do not be defeated (13). This has to do with faithfulness under testing until the Lord returns. Do not let the lawlessness around you rob you of your fervor (v. 12). A lost world around you needs to hear the gospel (v. 14), so get busy!

Do not be doubtful (34–35). Religious leaders will come and go, stand and fall; but the Word will not change. Believe it, obey it, and hold to it—no matter what others may say or do. Your Bible is God's light in this dark world (2 Pet. 1:19–21).

Do not be distracted (42). We "watch" when we stay alert and remind ourselves that our Lord may come at any time. When in your heart you delay His coming (v. 48), you start to lose your effectiveness and witness. Keep watching and working!

MATTHEW 25

When Jesus Christ returns, it will be a time of *separation:* the wise will be separated from the foolish, the faithful servants from the unfaithful, the blessed (sheep) from the cursed (goats). The wise virgins had oil and were prepared to meet the Bridegroom. Many people profess to be Christians but do not have the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9) and are not born again. They may mingle with the saved, but they are not really one of them; and they will not enter into the marriage feast.

His coming also means *evaluation.* As we wait for the Lord to return, we must invest our lives and earn dividends for His glory. Christ gives us opportunities that match our abilities, and the one-talent servant is just as important as the five-talent servant. The key is *faithfulness* (1 Cor. 4:2), for God measures us against ourselves and not against the other servants. Are you afraid to step out by faith and take some risks for God?

When Christ returns, it will be a time of *commendation.* We will be surprised to learn about ministries we performed that we thought were insignificant but that He will reward. This parable is not teaching salvation by good works. Christ's sheep know that they are sheep (John 10:14, 27–30), but they do not always realize what their service means to Christ. We will experience some surprises in that day!

"Great services reveal our possibilities; small services our consecration."

George Morrison

MATTHEW 26

Life presents us with many opportunities; how we respond to them depends on what we love and what we look for in life.

The Jewish leaders looked for opportunity to destroy Jesus, while at the same time Jesus was anticipating the opportunity to obey His Father and bring Him glory.

Mary used the opportunity she had for expressing her devotion to Christ, but Judas used that same opportunity to criticize her. Nothing given in love to Jesus is ever wasted. Judas was the one who ended up wasting his life!

Jesus eagerly anticipated the opportunity to be with His disciples, even though He knew one would betray Him, one would deny Him, and all would forsake Him. He sought to help them and prepare them for the trial before them.

Peter missed his opportunities to become strong and be a victor. He boasted when he should have listened (vv. 32–35), slept when he should have prayed (vv. 36–46), fought when he should have surrendered (vv. 47–56), and followed when he should have fled for safety (vv. 57–75; note v. 31). But when the opportunity came for him to repent, he wept.

No matter what others did, Jesus was in complete command and knew how to make the most of every opportunity. "Not as I will, but as You will" is the secret (v. 39). God will give you many opportunities today. Use them wisely!

"God's best gifts are not things but opportunities. What we call adversity, God calls opportunity."

MATTHEW 27

Jesus is the example to follow when you suffer unjustly (1 Pet. 2:18–23).

He did not reply when accused (11–14). In this, He fulfilled Isaiah 53:7. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent (Eccles. 3:7), and we must exercise discernment. One thing is sure: no matter what He said, they would not have believed Him.

He did not retaliate when abused (15–31). He had the power to destroy those who mocked Him; in fact, legions of angels would have delivered Him. But it was the Father's will that He suffer as He did, and Jesus was obedient to His Father's will.

He did not accept the cup (32–38). The narcotic drink would have helped deaden the pain, but Jesus refused it. He drank the cup of suffering instead.

He did not come down from the cross (40–44). Had He come down from the cross, the people still would not have believed in Him. And if He saved Himself, He could not save others (John 12:23–28). First the suffering, then the glory; first the cross, then the crown. Remember that the next time you are tempted to take the easy way.

"Leave out the cross, and you have killed the religion of Jesus. Atonement by the blood of Jesus is not an arm of Christian truth; it is the heart of it."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

MATTHEW 28

The message of the empty tomb is, "Do not be afraid!"

He overcomes His enemies (1–5). In His death and resurrection, our Lord defeated the world (John 16:33), the flesh (Rom. 6:1–7), the devil (John 12:31), and death itself (1 Cor. 15:50–58). You need not be afraid of life or death, time or eternity (Rev. 1:17–18).

He keeps His promises (6–7). Because His followers forgot His resurrection promise, they were sorrowing instead of rejoicing. The Lord always keeps His promises, no matter how dark the day may be.

He goes before you (7–10). When the women ran to share the message, they met the Lord; you always meet Him in the path of obedience. The Shepherd goes before the sheep and prepares the way for them (John 10:4). You have a living and victorious Savior who has everything under control. Trust Him!

He is our Lord (11–20). He has *all authority;* He commands us to take the gospel to *all nations;* and He promises to be

with us *always*. What more assurance could we want? We are His ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20) and should be faithful to Him in *all things*.

The Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a vital part of the gospel message, for a dead Christ can save nobody (1 Cor. 15:1–19). The empty tomb is proof that He is the Son of God (Rom. 1:4); that believers have a future inheritance (1 Pet. 1:3ff.); that we will once again meet Christians who have died (1 Thess. 4:14–18); that our Christian ministry is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:50–58); and that Jesus Christ will one day judge lost sinners (Acts 17:30–31). The early church bore witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:22; 4:2, 33), and so should we today.

MARK

John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10; Acts 4:36–37; 11:19–30) and the son of Mary, a leading woman in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:12). He helped Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25—13:5) but for some reason did not remain with them (Acts 13:13). That failure caused Paul and Barnabas to separate, but Barnabas gave Mark another chance (Acts 15:36–41). In later years, Mark became one of Paul's associates (Philem. 24); and Paul commended him for his work (2 Tim. 4:11). It all ended well.

First Peter 5:13 suggests that John Mark was converted through Peter's ministry. Many Bible scholars believe that Mark's gospel is a record of Peter's reports of the ministry of Christ, presenting Jesus Christ as the Servant of God (Mark 10:45). Mark often used the word *immediately,* for he describes the work of a Servant who was busy obeying His Father and meeting the needs of people (1:10, 12, 20–21, etc.). Mark wrote with the Romans in mind, an active people who admired accomplishment.

After a brief introduction (1:1–13), the book tells of Christ's ministry in Galilee (1:14—9:50), His journey to Jerusalem (chap. 10), His ministry in Jerusalem, climaxing with His crucifixion (chaps. 11–15), and His resurrection and ascension (chap. 16).

MARK 1

Even a servant must have credentials, and our Lord has the very best. His coming was prophesied by Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1) and announced by John the Baptist. The Father and the Holy Spirit commended Him (vv. 9–11), and Satan could not defeat Him (vv. 12–13). He is a Servant you can trust.

But what can He do? What is His work? He can guide your life and make it a success (vv. 16–20). He can overcome Satan (vv. 21–28) and sickness (vv. 29–34, 40–45) and use you to bring the message of salvation to a lost and needy world (vv. 35–39). You can be a servant of the Servant and share in His wonderful work.

Where did the Servant get His power? He depended on the Holy Spirit (v. 12) and prayer (v. 35). He did not allow the demands of the work to rob Him of the time He needed to renew His strength. If the holy Son of God needed to pray, how much more do you need to pray! In the Lord's service, you cannot "run on empty." (See Isa. 40:28–31.)

MARK 2

Consider the unique ministries of God's Servant, Jesus Christ.

He forgives our sins (1–12). Imagine a servant having such authority! The healing of the body is a great miracle, but it does not last. The forgiveness of sin is God's greatest miracle, for it lasts forever and accomplishes the greatest good. The Servant forgives us *and pays the price for the miracle!*

Garments of New Life

Our first parents tried to cover their sins with garments they made (Gen. 3:7), but God would not accept them. Instead, He clothed them with skins (Gen. 3:21); blood had to be shed (Heb. 9:22). Jesus did not come to do a patchwork job on our lives; He came to make us whole. We have been raised from the dead (Eph. 2:1–10); and like Lazarus, we must take off the old garments of death and put on the garments of new life (John 11:44; Col. 3:1ff.).

He fellowships with "sinners" (13–22). Why? Because they are sick, and He is the only Physician who can heal them. They are hungry and lonely, and He is the Bridegroom who asks them to His wedding feast. Their lives are in tatters, and He wants to give them a new robe of righteousness. Others may be able to patch up life, but He alone can give new life.

He frees us from bondage (23–28). He is Lord of the Sabbath, the Giver of rest (Matt. 11:28–30). Man's religious traditions can be a terrible yoke of bondage; but when you follow the Lord, you experience freedom and rest.

MARK 3

Some resist the Servant (1–6, 20–30). The religious leaders were more concerned about protecting their tradition than helping a man with a handicapping condition. In spite of all that Jesus did and said, they hardened their hearts and resisted His ministry, even to the extent of accusing Him of being in league with Satan. In the end, *they* cooperated with the evil one!

Some assist the Servant (7–19). The crowds were so large that Jesus had to empower His disciples to help Him in ministry. There is a job for everyone, even if only giving Him a little boat to use (v. 9). If you want to assist Him, remember that the most important thing is *being with Him* (v. 14). As He said,"Without Me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Some mistrust the Servant (vv. 31–35). Mary bore other children after the birth of Jesus, but they did not believe in Him (John 7:1–5). Even His mother seemed to have doubts about her "popular" Son who was arousing the anger of the leaders. But Jesus was doing the will of God, and so should we (v. 35).

MARK 4

Receiving God's Word (1–25). Even when we read the Bible, we should *hear* the voice of God speaking to our hearts. It must be personal. Never treat the Bible like any other book (1 Thess. 2:13). Jesus warns us to take heed *that* we hear (v. 9), *what* we hear (v. 24), and *how* we hear (Luke 8:18). The more of the Word we receive and share, the more God will give to us.

Reaping God's harvest (26–34). It is our job to sow the seed; we cannot make the seed germinate and produce a harvest. Even a busy farmer must sleep and let God work! However, when the harvest is ready, we must be alert and reap it, or the harvest may be lost (John 4:35–38).

Relying on God's power (35–41). Our faith in His Word is tested in the storms of life. If the disciples had really trusted His Word (v. 35), they would not have panicked and accused Him of not caring. You can trust His Word, for it will never fail.

MARK 5

The Servant comes to us (1–20). Jesus went through a storm to get to two demoniacs (Matt. 8:28) who needed his help. The demons begged not to be sent to the pit (v. 10), the citizens begged Jesus to leave (v. 17), and one healed man begged to be allowed to go with Jesus (v. 18). The citizens were concerned more with financial profit than with spiritual benefit. Imagine asking Jesus to leave you!

We can come to the Servant (21–34). All kinds of people came to the feet of Jesus. A well-known synagogue leader and an anonymous sick woman could find help there. Perhaps the woman's faith was a bit superstitious, but the Lord still honored it. If you cannot grasp His hand, touch the hem of His garment. The first step of faith, no matter how weak, will lead to greater blessings.

The Servant will go with us (35–43). No situation is so desperate that Jesus cannot work. Disease, delays, and even death are under His control. Jesus goes with you to the place of disappointment and sorrow and meets your needs. No matter how depressing your situation may appear, "Do not be afraid; only believe" (v. 36). The Servant is working for you.

MARK 6

The Servant cannot work (1–29). His neighbors were amazed at what Jesus said and did, but Jesus was amazed at their unbelief that would not let Him do more: "According to your faith let it be to you" (Matt. 9:29; Ps. 78:41). Ask God to strengthen your faith so that you can glorify Him (Rom. 4:20–

21). Our Lord's response to their unbelief was to send out His disciples to minister. Herod silenced one voice, but he could not silence the Word of God (Col. 4:2–4).

The Servant cannot rest (30–44). God's servants become weary as they work (John 4:6) and must care for the body. But when you have a compassionate heart, you will not have an idle hand. Our Lord interrupted His vacation to meet the needs of the people. He need not interrupt anything today, because caring for us is His constant ministry (Heb. 7:25).

The Servant cannot pray (45–56). After such a demanding time of ministry, Jesus had to go apart to pray (v. 46; 1:35). But once again, He was interrupted, this time by the plight of His disciples in the midst of the sea (v. 48). And it was the disciples who were amazed (v. 51)! Jesus intercedes for you and knows your situation. He will come to you, care for you, and lead you into His peace.

MARK 7

Defilement (1–23). Unless we are very careful, religious rituals can create serious problems. They may be given as much authority as God's Word (v. 7) and even replace God's Word (v. 9). They may give a false confidence that what you do on the outside will somehow change the inside. But the heart must be changed, and external rituals cannot do that. The heart can be purified only by faith (Acts 15:9).

Distance (24–30). Jesus healed both the centurion's servant (Matt. 8:1–13) and this woman's demonized daughter *from a distance*. Both were Gentiles, and the Gentiles were "at a distance" spiritually; but Jesus would erase that distance at the cross (Eph. 2:11–22). As you pray for those far from you, or far from the Lord, remember that He can send His Word and do mighty works (Ps. 107:20).

Deliverance (31–37). The miracles of healing this deaf man and healing a blind man (8:22–26) are recorded only by Mark. Both were in gentile territory, which would interest his Roman readers; both were performed away from the crowd; and both were performed despite difficulty. The Servant can work at a distance or when we bring people to Him, and He does not fail.

MARK 8

Defective faith (vv. 1–10). The disciples didn't know what to do with the hungry crowd, yet they had seen Jesus feed the five thousand (6:30–44). They apparently "soon forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel" (Ps. 106:13). Each work that He does should encourage you to trust Him to help you solve the next problem. Keep a long memory for His mercies and a short one for your failures.

Defective understanding (11–21). The disciples did not perceive what He meant by the leaven (vv. 13–21). The blindness of the Pharisees does not surprise us (vv. 11–12), but why were His followers so blind? Like Israel of old, the disciples saw His acts but did not understand His ways (Ps. 103:7). Ask God to give you spiritual insight.

Defective sight (22–26). This is the only healing miracle recorded that took place in stages. Bethsaida was under judgment (Matt. 11:21–24), so Jesus took the man out of there and told him not to go back. Be careful where you send people whose eyes have been opened to Jesus and His mercy.

Defective devotion (27–38). One minute, Peter is inspired from heaven (Matt. 16:17); and the next minute, his tongue is ignited from hell (v. 33; James 3:6). Peter saw only shame in the Cross, but Jesus saw glory. Peter saw defeat, but Jesus saw great victory. Never be afraid or ashamed to be His disciple and bear your cross, for Jesus bore it first.

MARK 9

Consider some paradoxes of the Christian life.

Glory out of suffering (1–13). What happened on the Mount of Transfiguration was a confirmation of the testimony Peter gave. But it was also a revelation of the glory of the Cross (Gal. 6:14). First the suffering, then the glory. When you read 1 Peter, you discover that Peter learned his lesson well (1:6–8, 11; 4:12–16; 5:1, 10). Satan offers you glory without suffering (Matt. 4:8–10), but it ends up suffering without glory.

Victory out of defeat (14–29). Their failure to deliver the boy grieved the Lord, gave support to the enemy, and robbed God of glory. The nine disciples who were left behind had neglected

their spiritual disciplines and lost their power (v. 29; 6:7). When you find yourself defeated, turn to Him for victory and discover where you went wrong.

Greatness out of service (30–41). This is a key passage in Mark's gospel because it emphasizes the importance of service. Do not aim for human greatness; aim to be more like Jesus Christ. Do not measure yourself by other servants (vv. 38–41); measure yourself by Him.

Gain out of loss (42–50). If you pamper sin in your life, you will lose your "salty" character and not be able to affect others for Christ. Deal drastically with sin as a surgeon does with a cancerous tumor. You gain by losing.

"One reason sin flourishes is that it is treated like a cream puff instead of a rattlesnake!"

Billy Sunday

MARK 10

How far can I go (1–16)? The rabbis didn't agree on their interpretation of the divorce law (Deut. 24:1–4), one school being lenient and the other strict. When you live "by permission," you are tempted to follow those who tell you what you want to hear. Our Lord led the Pharisees back to God's original plan and interpreted it for them.

How much can I keep (17–27)? The rich young man was looking for a bargain, the best of both worlds; but he was doomed to failure. Calculation and crucifixion do not agree. At Calvary, there was no bargaining—just Jesus giving His all.

How much will we get (28–45)? Jesus promises to reward all who faithfully follow Him, but He warns against having rewards as your only motive for service. If you are His disciple, expect a cross, a cup, and a baptism, for the servant is not greater than his Lord. The important question is, "How much can we give?"

"*Has He taken over in your heart? Perhaps He* resides *there, but does He* preside *there?*"

Vance Havner

MARK 11

Honor (1–11). The donkey was a royal animal, and the event was a coronation celebration (1 Kings 1:32–40). It was the only time our Lord permitted a public demonstration in His honor, and He did it to fulfill prophecy (Zech. 9:9) and turn the people's hearts back to the Word of God. They did not listen. What changes would Jesus make if He entered our places of worship today?

Hunger (12–14, 20–26). The fig tree pictures Israel, taking up space but not producing fruit (Luke 13:6–9). When we stop bearing fruit, the problem always starts with the roots (v. 20; Matt. 3:10). Jesus reminds us that we must have faith and forgiveness when we pray, or God will not answer.

Holiness (15–19). The psalmist proclaimed, "Holiness adorns Your house" (Ps. 93:5). But unholiness made the temple a place for thieves to hide! The leaders were not *praying;* they were *preying* and using religion only to make money.

Honesty (27–33). The leaders had not been honest with John the Baptist, and now they refused to be honest with Jesus. When we obey, God teaches us more (John 7:17); if we disobey, we close the door on God's truth.

MARK 12

Each family chose its Passover lamb on the tenth day of the month and carefully examined it until the fourteenth day to be sure it had no defects (Exod. 12:1–6). During His last week of public ministry, God's Lamb (John 1:29) was examined in various ways, and He passed every test. No guile was found in His mouth (Isa. 53:9).

In His replies, Jesus revealed to them who He was; yet they

would not accept the truth. He is the Son sent by the Father (vv. 1–9) and the Stone rejected by the builders (vv. 10–11; Ps. 118:22–23; Acts 4:11). His enemies were so intent on destroying Jesus that they did not realize they were destroying only themselves.

All political questions (vv. 13–17) and hypothetical doctrinal questions (vv. 18–27) are chaff compared to the most important question of all: Is Jesus Christ your Lord (vv. 35–37) and do you love Him (vv. 28–34)?

If you were to point out the spiritual people in this chapter, would you indicate the pious scribes (vv. 38–40) or the poor widow (vv. 41–44)? Read Revelation 2:9 and 3:17.

On Giving *The Lord watches* how *we give (Mark 12:41–44) and examines the motives of the heart (Matt. 6:1–4). He also sees* how much *we give and measures the* proportion, *not the* portion *(1 Cor. 16:2). An old epitaph reads, "What I gave, I have. What I spent, I had. What I kept, I lost."*

MARK 13

This is Mark's version of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24—25), written with gentile readers in mind (v. 14). If we are to be ready and faithful in these last days, we must heed the admonitions of Jesus.

Take heed that no one deceives you (5). Political and geological disruption will give false prophets and false Christs great opportunity to deceive people. Persecution against God's people will either strengthen us or weaken us.

Take heed to what Jesus taught (23). The Word of God is the only dependable light in this dark world (2 Pet. 1:19). Jesus has told us beforehand what to expect and what to avoid, and we must heed His words. His Word is dependable and durable, so trust it.

Take heed, watch, and pray (33). During the tribulation period, various signs will signal Christ's return to earth; but believers today are looking for the Savior and not for signs. "Be alert and keep praying!" is His admonition. "Do the work I have given you to do." You want to be found faithful when He comes, and He could come today.

MARK 14

Preparation for betrayal (1–2, 10–11). Judas solved the chief priests' problem by offering to lead them to Jesus. But how do you "conveniently" betray the Son of God? Is it not a *costly* endeavor in every way?

Preparation for burial (1–9). Mary's act of worship brought joy to the heart of Jesus and malice to the heart of Judas, who wanted the money she had spent (John 12:6). Other women came to anoint Him *after* His burial (16:1), but Mary did it when He could be encouraged by her love.

Preparation for fellowship (12–26). It meant much to Jesus to spend those hours with His disciples. He loved them (John 13:1), and their presence encouraged Him. He took the cup and the bread of the Passover and transformed them into memorials of His own blood and body, for He wanted the disciples to remember Him.

Preparation for danger (27–31, 66–72). The good fellowship in the Upper Room made the Twelve forget the danger outside, so Jesus gave them warning. Peter was not the only one who boasted and felt self-confident: "And they all said likewise" (v. 31). Heed His warnings; He knows what is coming.

Preparation for death (32–65). Jesus' prayers reveal the conflict in His holy soul as He faced bearing the sins of the world on the cross. When you have a Gethsemane experience, pray what He prayed: "Not what I will, but what You will" (v. 36). Peter had a sword, but Jesus took a cup. You need not fear the cup the Father has prepared for you. Jesus could submit to the abuse of men because He had already submitted to the will of God.

MARK 15

When you face the unjust assaults of an evil world, remember Jesus. The world says, "Defend yourself!" but Jesus was

silent (vv. 1–5). The world says, "Pamper yourself!" but Jesus refused the drug (v. 23). The world says, "Save yourself!" but Jesus remained on the cross and finished the work the Father gave Him to do (v. 30).

Simon and the Cross

Simon of Cyrene had probably come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (Acts 2:10), and he met the Lamb of God! It seems certain that he was converted and went home to lead his two sons to faith in Christ. These men were known to Mark's Roman readers, so they must have become leaders in the church (Rom. 16:13). The next time your plans are interrupted and you have to carry another cross, remember what Simon did for Jesus—and what Jesus did for Simon.

Jesus Gave Himself

The devil told Jesus, "Serve Yourself!" (Matt. 4:3–4). Peter said, "Pity Yourself!" (Matt. 16:21–23). His unsaved relatives said, "Show Yourself!" (John 7:4). The crowd at Calvary said, "Save Yourself!" But Jesus was deaf to all those appeals and gave Himself.

The chief priests were guilty of *envy* (v. 10), and Pilate was guilty of *compromise* (v. 15). Their sins led to the release of an evil man (v. 15), the embarrassment of an innocent man (v. 21), and the death of a good Man (v. 25); yet envy and compromise are not looked upon as terrible sins today. Should they be?

Man was doing his worst, but God was doing His best and fulfilling His Word (vv. 28, 34): "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20). And He did it for you and me!

MARK 16

He arose (1–8). Because they forgot His resurrection promises, the women were in sorrow and worrying about the future: "Who will roll away the stone?" When they learned that Jesus was alive, their first response was fear and not faith; but then they became the first heralds of the Resurrection. The angel had a special word for Peter (v. 7) who was no doubt still grieving his sins. The living Christ gives you something to rejoice in, something to talk about, and something to look forward to. He goes before you!

Saved Through Faith

Sinners are saved through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8–9), and they bear witness of their faith through baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 10:47). Some signs described in Mark 16:17–18 occurred during the apostolic period described in the book of Acts. They were the "credentials" of the apostles (Heb. 2:1–4; Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12), so we must not assume that they belong to every believer today. It is foolish to tempt God *by drinking poison or handling poisonous snakes, but it is not foolish to* trust God *when obedience to His will takes us into dangerous situations. Presumption can kill us, but faith can deliver us.*

He appeared (9–18). This section summarizes the Lord's resurrection appearances. All to whom He appeared became witnesses of His resurrection (Acts 1:22), just as we should be today (Rom. 6:4; Phil. 3:10).

He ascended (19–20). The Servant is the Sovereign at the Father's right hand! He humbled Himself in obedience, and God exalted Him in glory (Phil. 2:5–11). But He is not idle, for He is working with His people as they take the gospel to every nation. What an encouragement to be a witness for your Lord!

LUKE

Luke was a physician, probably a Greek (Col. 4:10–11, 14), the companion of Paul on some of his journeys. (Note the pronouns "we" and "us" in Acts 16:10; 20:5; 21:1; 27:1.) He wrote the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–3), both of which are records of journeys: Christ's journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51) and Paul's journey to Rome.

Dr. Luke wrote with the Greeks in mind and presented Jesus Christ as the perfect Son of man, the compassionate Savior (Luke 19:10). He mentions women, children, and the poor often in his gospel; and *joy* and *rejoicing* are repeated many times. There is also an emphasis on prayer and on God's love for the whole world. Luke addressed both books to Theophilus ("lover of God"), a Roman believer, possibly an official, who needed grounding in the faith.

Luke's approach is simple. He records our Lord's birth and early life (chaps. 1—2); His baptism and temptation (3:1—4:13); His ministry in Galilee (4:14—9:17); His ministry en route to Jerusalem (9:18—19:27); and His final week of ministry in Jerusalem (19:28—24:53).

As you read the gospel of Luke, you will come to love the compassionate Son of man who cares for those in need and wants His message of salvation to be taken to the whole world.

LUKE 1

Serving (1–25). His disappointment at not having a son did not keep Zacharias from serving the Lord. Be faithful; you never know when God's angel may arrive. Zacharias had the faith to keep on praying; but when the answer came, he did not have the faith to accept it. He looked at his limitations rather than God's great power. Unbelief produces silence (Ps.

116:10; 2 Cor. 4:13); faith opens your mouth in praise to God.

Submitting (26–38). What an honor to be chosen to be the mother of the Messiah! Mary humbly submitted to the Lord because she had faith that He would keep His promise. Her decision would bring her sorrow and suffering, but she willingly yielded it. She was "blessed among women" because of the grace of God given to her (vv. 28, 30). All who trust Christ as their Savior are highly graced by the Lord (Eph. 1:6).

Jesus' Greatness

It was said of John the Baptist, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1:15); but of Jesus it was said, "He will be great" (Luke 1:32). He is the great Prophet (Luke 7:16), the great God and Savior (Titus 2:13), the great High Priest (Heb. 4:14), and the great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20).

"Do Not Be Afraid"

The encouraging phrase "Do not be afraid!" is found often in Luke's gospel, for the message of salvation replaces fear with joy. All kinds of people heard it: Zacharias (1:13), Mary (1:30), the shepherds (2:10), Peter (5:10), Jairus (8:50), and the disciples (12:7, 32).

Singing (39–80). A pregnant Jewish girl from Nazareth, engaged to marry a poor carpenter, what did Mary have to sing about? She sang about the Lord, what He did for *her* (vv. 46–49), for *all who fear Him* (vv. 50–53), and for *His people Israel* (vv. 54–55). God gives power to the weak, thrones to the lowly, and food to the hungry; but the strong, the rich, and the mighty go away empty.

Zacharias praised God for what He would do for His people, Israel. It was the dawning of a new day (vv. 78–79) because the Messiah was about to be born. God keeps His promises and is faithful to His covenants.

LUKE 2

You cannot escape Jesus Christ.

His birth affected Caesar's politics (vv. 1–3), the ministry of the angels (vv. 8–15), and the activities of common men (vv. 15–20). In that day, shepherds were looked upon with disdain; but God singled them out to be the first human messengers of Messiah's birth. His coming touched worshipers (vv. 21–38) and even scholars (vv. 39–52).

The angels sang about Him, and He is still the theme of the greatest music. Luke wrote about Him, and He is still the subject of the greatest literature. The shepherds hastened to behold Him, and He is still at the center of the greatest art. Teachers listened to Him and marveled, and He is still the focal point for all truth and wisdom.

In His development, Jesus was perfectly balanced: intellectually (wisdom), physically (stature), spiritually (in favor with God), and socially (in favor with man); and He is still the greatest example for childhood and youth.

He alone is worthy of our worship!

Oh, come! Let us adore Him!

LUKE 3

Prophecy. God's message did not come to any of the "great leaders" of that day. It came to John the Baptist, the last and the greatest of God's prophets. John's ministry was foretold by the prophet Isaiah (vv. 4–6; Isa. 40:3–5). John was a prophet who was the subject of prophecy!

Ministry. John was privileged to prepare the nation for the Messiah and then present Him to them. John preached against sin and told the people to repent. He gave specific instructions to his converts on how to put their faith into practice. He was inspecting fruit (v. 8), getting to the root of sin (v. 9), and warning about wrath to come (vv. 7, 17). Would you accept that kind of ministry?

Mystery. The Son of God is baptized; the Spirit lights upon Him like a dove; and the Father speaks His approval from heaven. Never forget that all of the holy Trinity is involved in your salvation (Eph. 1:1–14).

History. The genealogy (vv. 23–38) is that of Mary whose father was Heli. Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, though that was what people assumed (John 1:45; 6:42). The genealogy of Joseph is found in Matthew 1. It was unusual to pay attention to the genealogy of a woman, which shows Dr. Luke's concern for neglected people. Gentile history (v. 1) and Jewish history (vv. 23–38) are in the hands of almighty God, fulfilling His purposes.

LUKE 4

The Conqueror (1–13). You can be filled with the Spirit (v. 1) and obedient to God's will and still experience temptations and trials. Because He faced the enemy and conquered, Jesus can identify with you in your temptations and can help you win the victory (Heb. 2:17–18). It is not a sin to be tempted, for Jesus was tempted; but it is a sin to yield. Satan's promise is, "All will be yours" (v. 7); but in Jesus Christ, you already have all things (1 Cor. 3:21–23), and Satan can give you nothing.

The Preacher (14–30). The Spirit not only gives us victory, but He leads us (v. 14) and empowers us for service (v. 18). The text for our Lord's message was Isaiah 61:1–2. It describes what Jesus came to do and what He is still doing in lives today. The people in the synagogue wanted a comforting sermon, not a convicting sermon. When Jesus mentioned God's grace to the Gentiles (vv. 23–27), the people became angry and threw Him out! They forfeited His blessings because they rejected His word.

The Healer (31–44). Jesus fulfilled His commission (vv. 18–19) by bringing healing and deliverance to the poor and needy by the authority of His word. Had He not overcome the devil privately, Jesus could not have defeated him publicly. While the preaching of the Word was His major ministry (vv. 42–44), Jesus had compassion on the sick and healed them. We may not have the power to heal, but we can comfort and assist those who are needy; and we can do it in Jesus' name (Matt. 25:34–40).

LUKE 5

Jesus responds to submission (1–11). If you had fished all night and caught nothing, would you be getting ready to go out fishing again? One reason Jesus called several fishermen to be His disciples was that they never quit! Peter may have thought he knew more about fishing than Jesus did, but he did what Jesus commanded; and the Lord honored his obedient faith. No failure is final if you come to the Lord for a new start.

Jesus responds to sickness (12–14). Lepers were not to approach people; but the man came to Jesus in desperation, and Jesus healed him. The offering Jesus referred to is described in Leviticus 14 and pictures the salvation work of the Lord. Ponder it.

Jesus responds to success (15–16). The crowds sought Him, but Jesus withdrew to pray and commune with the Father. He did not allow popularity to detour Him from the Father's will. Vance Havner said, "Success can feather our nest so comfortably that we forget how to fly."

Jesus responds to sinners (17–39). He forgave the paralytic, Matthew the publican, and Matthew's friends who trusted Him because He is the "friend of sinners" (Matt. 11:19). He could not forgive the scribes and Pharisees because they would not admit they were sick and in need of new clothes!

"They Forsook All"

Peter and his associates had met the Lord earlier (John 1:35–42), had gone with Him on His ministry through Galilee (Mark 1:16–20), but had returned to their fishing business. They now had the call to leave everything and follow the Lord as His apostles (Luke 5:9–11).

LUKE 6

True liberty (1–11). People who live only by "Is it lawful?" cannot understand our Lord's principle, "Is it loving?" The

scribes and Pharisees had transformed the Sabbath from a day of blessing into a day of bondage, and Jesus deliberately healed on the Sabbath so He could challenge them. It is always right to do good and to meet human need (Mic. 6:8), for love fulfills the law (Rom. 13:8–10).

True values (12–26). In His ordination sermon for the apostles, Jesus emphasized the true spiritual values of life in contrast to the false values of the Pharisees (Matt. 23). Comfortable living is not always Christian living.

True love (27–45). Yes, God's people have their enemies, even as Jesus did; and we must be Christlike in the way we treat them. We must be giving and forgiving; and we must pray for them, not that God would destroy them but that He would change them. The best way to conquer an enemy is to make him a friend. Keep your heart right with God (v. 45) and the Lord will produce the good fruit in your life.

True obedience (46–49). True obedience is not just words but deeds, and it involves hearing the Word and doing it (1 Thess. 2:13). Judas knew the vocabulary, but he did not do the will of God; and when the storm came, his house fell.

LUKE 7

He did not deserve it (1–10). "I am not worthy" was the centurion's confession of humility; and his confession of faith was, "Say the word!" It is great faith when we trust Christ to work just by speaking the Word. We can never deserve His blessings, but we can ask for them in faith.

True Rest

Christ's invitation to come to Him for rest (Matt. 11:28–30) precedes Luke 7:36–50. The sinful woman had heard that invitation and had come to Christ, and she found rest. She was ashamed of her past, but she was not ashamed of her Savior or of her tears.

She did not expect it (11–17). Nobody knew that Jesus would arrive and break up the funeral! Never despair, because your Lord may surprise you at the last minute and do the impossible for you.

He did not understand it (18–35). When the Lord is not doing what you expect Him to do, tell Him about it and listen to His Word. You may feel that your ministry has failed, but you are not the judge. Let Jesus have the final word.

She could not hide it (36–50). The sinful woman trusted Christ and He saved her; now she wanted to express her love to Him. True faith cannot be hidden, and true faith shows itself in love and worship. Simon the Pharisee was blind: he could not see himself, the Lord, or the woman. He did not know the debt he owed!

LUKE 8

A multitude hearing Him (1–25). Jesus was not impressed by the crowds that followed Him, for He knew the spiritual condition of their hearts. The parable of the sower helps us examine our hearts to see how we respond to the Word. But it is not enough to hear the Word (vv. 8, 18); we must also obey it (v. 21) and trust it when the time of testing comes (vv. 22–25).

A multitude rejecting Him (26–39). The healing of the Gadarene demoniacs (Matt. 8:28) should have endeared Jesus to the people, but the citizens were concerned more about pigs and money than about people and mercy. The man who begged to go with Jesus was the sanest one of all!

A multitude welcoming Him (40). This was on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum. Why did they welcome Him? Probably not because of their love for Him, but because they had seen many of His miracles and wanted Him to meet their needs. If Jesus were coming today, would you welcome Him? Why?

A multitude thronging Him (41–56). The people wanted to get next to Jesus so He could help them; but though they thronged Him, they did not have the touch of faith that the poor sick woman had. Being in the crowd is no assurance of receiving the blessing. Sometimes God has to get you away from the crowd before He can meet the need (v. 51).

LUKE 9

Christ equips us (1–6). He will never send us out to do a task without first giving us what we need. We are prone to trust what we have, but we should trust in Him alone. If we are in His will, we will have His supply.

Christ enables us (7–17). How could twelve men feed five thousand people? Only through the enabling of the Lord, for He did the miracle: they only distributed the blessing. Christ is looking for clean empty hands that He can fill.

Christ encourages us (18–36). If you confess Christ as Son of God and Savior, and take up your cross and follow Him, He will reveal to you His kingdom and His glory. When you experience the glory of God, the demands of discipleship become blessings that carry you along in joyful obedience.

Christ endures us (37–62). What strange words from the lips of Jesus: "How long shall I be with you and bear with you?" (v. 41). He must bear with our unbelief and failure (vv. 37–42), our spiritual blindness (vv. 43–45), our pride (vv. 46–48), our lack of love (vv. 49–56), and our lack of dedication (vv. 57–62). Is Jesus blessing you—or bearing with you?

LUKE 10

The chapter asks four questions by way of personal inventory.

What makes you serve (1–16)? Jesus was not limited to the Twelve; seventy others obeyed Him and helped to reap the harvest. But the laborers are still few, and Luke 9:57–62 tells why. The ministry is difficult and dangerous, but it is also very rewarding. Are you obedient to His call?

What makes you rejoice (17–24)? When the disciples rejoiced over their successful ministry, Jesus told them to rejoice because they were the citizens of heaven. After all, their work might not always be successful; but their salvation would never change. Jesus rejoiced because the Father's will was being accomplished in their lives. What brings joy to your heart?

What makes you pause (25–37)? It is not difficult to discuss neighborliness in the abstract, but it costs something to be a

real neighbor. Do you pause to help when you see injustice and hurt, or like the priest and the Levite, do you look for an escape? You are never more Christlike than when you feel another's hurt and seek to help.

What makes you listen (38–42)? Here is the basis for all ministry, taking time to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear His Word. It is important to serve the Lord and serve others, but it is even more important to delight your Lord by spending time with Him. Are you so busy serving Him that you have no time to love Him and listen to Him?

Serving Him

Faithful to my Lord's commands,
I still would choose the better part;
Serve with careful Martha's hands
And loving Mary's heart.

Charles Wesley

"*Justice seeks out the merits of the case, but pity only regards the need.*"

Bernard of Clairvaux

LUKE 11

His generosity (1–13). If Jesus, John the Baptist, and the Twelve all needed to pray, how much more do *we* need to pray! We must put God's concerns first (vv. 2–4), because prayer is based on *sonship,* not friendship. God is a loving Father, not a grouchy neighbor; He gives us what we need. He neither slumbers nor sleeps; and He doesn't become irritated when we ask for help (James 1:5).

His authority (14–36). More dangerous than open hostility (vv. 14–22) is attempted neutrality (vv. 23–26), for an empty life is an opportunity for Satan to move in and take over. The only sign we need is the "sign of Jonah," our Lord's resurrection from the dead (Acts 2:22–36). Jesus has won the victory over the prince of darkness. Obey Satan and you let in darkness rather than light, and soon you will not be able to distinguish between them (Matt. 6:22–23).

His honesty (37–54). He was a guest in the home, but Jesus did not flatter His host or the other guests by avoiding the truth. He exposed their hypocrisy and condemned them for their sins (Matt. 23). They defiled people (v. 44), burdened them (v. 46), and locked the door on them (v. 52), all the while posing as holy men of God. Instead of taking the opportunity of repenting and being forgiven, they opposed Jesus and attacked Him. What fools!

"Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man's will done in Heaven, but for getting God's will done in earth."

Robert Law

LUKE 12

A fearful heart (1–12). When you fear people, you start to hide things, and this leads to hypocrisy. You fail to confess Christ openly and depend on the Holy Spirit (vv. 8–12), and this silences your witness. When you fear God alone, you need fear no one else; and you can boldly witness for Christ. You are important to God and precious in His sight, so never fear what people can say or do.

A greedy heart (13–21). Imagine being so greedy that you would interrupt a sermon to ask for help to get more money! The weeds were certainly growing in that man's heart (Matt. 13:22). We all need a certain amount of money to live, but money is not a guarantee of security. If anything, it creates a *false* confidence that leads to foolishness.

A divided heart (22–34). The word translated "worry" (v. 22) means "to be pulled apart," and that is what worry does to you. If your heart is centered on Christ and trusting wholly in Him (v. 31), you will have a united heart that fears God alone (Ps. 86:11). If your treasures are heavenly, you need not worry; no enemy can take them!

A cold heart (35–59). We are God's servants, and He expects us to be faithfully doing our work when Jesus Christ returns. But when we stop looking for His coming, loving it (2 Tim. 4:8), and longing for it (Rev. 22:20), our hearts get cold, and we get worldly. The Lord will deal with careless servants when He returns, so we had better be ready.

LUKE 13

Tragedy (1–9). How easy it is to ask questions about others' tragedies and fail to learn the lessons they teach! The big question is not "Why do people die in tragic and seemingly meaningless ways?" but "Why does God keep me alive?" Am I really worth it? Am I bearing fruit or just taking up space?

Hypocrisy (10–17). The ruler of the synagogue was a hypocrite because he treated animals better than he treated people. Suppose the woman did come to the synagogue on another day. Could he have healed her? Of course not! We wonder how many needy people come to church meetings looking for love and help and go away disappointed.

"Yesterday is a canceled check. Tomorrow is a promissory note. Today is the only cash you have, so invest it wisely."

Opportunity (18–35). God's kingdom is at work in this world, but many people fail to take advantage of their opportunities. Instead of entering the kingdom, some people only ask questions about it. Salvation is not a theory to discuss; it is a miracle to experience. No wonder Jesus wept when He saw

sinners passing by their opportunities to be saved! Do not wait for opportunities to come; they are already here.

LUKE 14

Do I exploit people (1–14)? When we eat together, it should be a time of loving fellowship and joyful gratitude to God; but the Pharisees turned tables into traps and exploited people. They used a man with a handicapping condition in trying to catch Jesus; they went to feasts only to receive honors; and they invited to their feasts only people who would return the favor. Hospitality is ministry only if our motive is to help others and glorify God.

Do I invite people (15–24)? Salvation is a feast, not a funeral (5:33–39); and God wants His house filled. As His servants, we have the privilege to tell the world, "Come, for all things are now ready!" (v. 17). Even if some reject the invitation, keep sharing it. Those who think they are the least worthy are the ones He wants to have at His feast.

Do I follow people (25–35)? It is easy to be part of the crowd and follow a popular Jesus, but that is not true discipleship. He calls you away from the crowd to take up your cross and follow Him. When it comes to winning the lost, God wants His house filled; but when it comes to discipleship, Christ thins out the ranks and wants only those who will die to self and live for Him.

LUKE 15

These parables are Christ's defense of His ministry, explaining why He fellowshiped with sinners and even ate with them.

He saw what they were. They were sheep that had gone astray and needed a shepherd to bring them home. They were lost coins, stamped with the image of God, needing to get back into circulation again. They were disobedient sons who were wasting their inheritance and needed to come home to the Father.

He saw how they got that way. Sheep are foolish animals and naturally go astray, but the spiritual shepherds in Israel

had not faithfully ministered to them (Jer. 23; Ezek. 34). The woman lost the coin because of carelessness, and the son was lost because of his willfulness. The father did not search for the boy but let him learn his lessons the hard way and discover how good it was back home. (See Rom. 2:4.)

He saw what they could be. Jesus always saw the potential in people. The sheep could be brought back to the flock and bring joy to the shepherd; the coin could be found; and the son could return home and lovingly serve his father. There is hope for every sinner because Jesus welcomes everyone.

LUKE 16

The subject is money, and the object is to teach us the proper place of money in life.

We can waste money (1). Stewards should use wealth for their masters' good and not for their own pleasure (1 Cor. 4:2). God wants us to *enjoy* His gifts (1 Tim. 6:17), but He also wants us to *employ* them wisely.

We can serve God with money (2–9). The man had a rude awakening: he had to give an account of his stewardship (Rom. 14:10–12; 2 Cor. 5:10). Then he learned to be wise and to invest wealth in people and in the future. We do not "buy" friends, but we can make friends for the Lord by the wise use of money. Will people welcome you to heaven because your stewardship made it possible for them to hear the gospel and be saved?

"*Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can.*"

John Wesley

"*Money is a wonderful servant, a terrible master, and an abominable god.*"

We can try to serve God and money (10–18). The Pharisees tried it but it cannot be done. How can you serve both righteousness and unrighteousness, what is greatest and what is least, what God honors and what He abominates? The world measures people by how much they get, but God measures them by how much they give.

We can let money be our god (19–31). The rich man did not go to Hades because he was rich; he went there because riches were his god. Abraham was a wealthy man, and yet he was in paradise. Money can help send people to heaven (v. 9), or it can help send people to hell.

LUKE 17

Faith is like a seed: it seems small and weak, but it has life in it; and if it is cultivated, it will grow and release power. We need faith for many areas of life.

Faith to forgive (1–4). When people sin repeatedly, giving up on them is easy; but we must forgive them and trust God to work in their lives. We must be stepping stones and not stumbling blocks.

Faith to serve (5–10). It takes faith to do your duty, whether tending a field or a flock or preparing a meal. It takes faith to do the extraordinary, like moving a mountain.

Faith to pray (11–19). The ten men believed that Jesus could help them, and He did. The Samaritan not only brought joy to Christ's heart but received salvation from His hand: "Your faith has saved you!" When God answers your prayers, be sure to tell Him "thank You!"

Faith to be ready when He comes (20–37). The important thing is not to set dates but to be ready when He comes, for true faith leads to faithfulness. To *look around* at the increase in sin will discourage you, and to *look back* (as did Lot's wife) may destroy you, so *look up* and eagerly expect the Lord's return today!

LUKE 18

Confident prayer (1–8). If an unjust judge helps a poor widow, how much more will a loving Father meet the needs of His children? We have open access into His treasury (Rom.

5:2) and can claim His gracious promises (Luke 11:9–10), so we ought to pray with faith and confidence. No need to argue—just come!

Arrogant prayer (9–17). True prayer should humble us and make us love others more. We should be like children coming to a Father and not like attorneys bringing an indictment. If prayer doesn't bless the one praying, it isn't likely to help anybody else.

Ignorant prayer (18–34). Although the young man had many good qualities, one of them was not spiritual understanding. He did not really see himself, Jesus, or the peril he was in because of his riches. The publican went away justified (v. 14) while the young man went away sorrowful (v. 23). What happens at the close of your prayers?

Persistent prayer (35–43). The blind man was not to be stopped! He had his great opportunity, and he would not let it pass. Our Lord stopped, looked, listened—and healed! Jesus is not too busy to hear you. Just be sure you are in earnest when you pray.

"The revelation of our spiritual standing is what we ask in prayer; sometimes what we ask is an insult to God; we ask with our eyes on the possibilities or on ourselves, not on Jesus Christ."

Oswald Chambers

LUKE 19

The day of salvation (1–10). Verse 10 is illustrated in the experience of Zacchaeus: Jesus *came* to him, *sought* him, and *saved* him. Though He was surrounded by a great crowd of people, Jesus took time for individuals, and He even saw a man in a tree! He is still the seeking Savior, but now He uses *your* eyes and lips.

The day of evaluation (11–27). There are three possible relationships with the King. You can reject His rule and be an

enemy, but that leads to judgment. You can accept His rule and be unfaithful, but that leads to loss of reward. Or you can accept His rule, do His will faithfully, and receive His reward. You are not to *protect* what He gives you but to *invest* it for His glory.

The day of visitation (28–43). What a tragedy that the Jewish nation did not know their own King when He came to them! But when He comes again, "will He really find faith on the earth" (18:8)? Our Lord wept, for He saw the terrible judgment that was coming to the city and the people.

God Seeks . . .

What is God looking for? He is seeking the lost (Luke 19:10), worshipers (John 4:23), fruit in our lives (Luke 13:7), and faithful servants (Ezek. 22:30). Has He found you?

LUKE 20

In spite of their evasive and hypocritical reply, the leaders *could not escape the past* (vv. 1–8). They had rejected the ministry of John the Baptist, and that led to their refusal to trust Jesus Christ. You may forget your decisions, but they will not forget you. You may even try to bury them, but they will be resurrected to accuse you.

"*Truth is incontrovertible. Panic may resent it; ignorance may deride it; malice may distort it; but there it is.*"

Sir Winston Churchill

Nor could they *escape future judgment* (vv. 9–19). They would reject the Son and the Stone, and that would bring about their ruin. Christ either saves you or judges you; there is no middle ground.

The leaders even failed to *escape present responsibility* (vv. 20–47). In asking Jesus trick questions, they hoped He would say something they could accuse; but His answers only exposed their folly and increased their guilt. They were fighting a losing battle and would not surrender.

LUKE 21

Maintaining the temple (1–4). Many of the religious leaders were corrupt, but the temple was still the place where God put His name and where sincere people could worship Him. Jesus did not criticize the people for supporting the temple ministry (Matt. 23:1–3), but He did notice *what* they gave. The *proportion,* not the portion, is important. Those who give "the widow's mite" give their all, not their least.

Destroying the temple (5–36). This is Luke's version of the Olivet Discourse found also in Matthew 24—25 and Mark 13. He is the only gospel writer who deals with our Lord's prediction of the fall of Jerusalem, which occurred in A.D. 70 (vv. 20–24). The rest of his report describes events in the last days before the return of Jesus Christ to earth. It will be a time of testing and testimony, oppression and opportunity, vengeance and victory.

Ministering in the temple (37–38). As a boy of twelve, Jesus discussed the Word in the temple (2:41–50); and He spent the last week before His death teaching the Word in His Father's house. He was hated by the religious leaders, and the temple was a den of thieves; but needy people were there, and Jesus taught them. He was quick to seize the opportunity, and the people were glad to hear Him.

LUKE 22

Satan in the temple (1–6). Judas was energized by Satan when he made his agreement with the religious leaders. Satan is a liar and murderer (John 8:44), and he helped Judas with his deception. But Satan deceived Judas as well, and the former disciple ended up a suicide. It is dangerous to make deals with the devil.

Satan in the Upper Room (7–38). Satan already controlled Judas, but he had to ask for permission to "sift" the disciples

and to tempt Peter (Job 1:12; 2:6). Satan is not all-powerful and must obey the limits set by the Lord (1 Cor. 10:13). The apostles had experienced some great blessings that evening, but danger was very near. Be on your guard when you have had a rich spiritual experience, for Satan is about to attack. And especially beware when you are trying to decide who is the greatest!

Satan in the Garden (39–53). Jesus said to those who had come to arrest Him, "But this is your hour, and the power of darkness" (v. 53). Because He had prayed and was yielded to the Father's will, Jesus was prepared for the arrest, but the disciples were not. If ever the work of Christ appeared to be ruined, it was in the garden; *but that was when Jesus was doing His very best in the Father's will.*

Satan in the courts (54–71). Satan was in the courtyard to sift Peter and in the council chamber to lead the men astray. His victory over Peter was only temporary, for the apostle wept, repented, and was restored. His victory over the religious leaders was complete, for he blinded their eyes to the truth (2 Cor. 4:3–6) and they condemned their own Messiah.

LUKE 23

Pilate wanted to get rid of Jesus as quickly and as easily as possible, but you cannot avoid making serious decisions about Him. Pilate ended up condemning an innocent Man, releasing a guilty man, and making friends with a wicked man. What a record for a Roman ruler whose responsibility it was to uphold the law and give people justice!

Herod wanted to see Jesus do a miracle! The evil king would make the Son of God into a court entertainer. Jesus performed no miracle; He spoke no word. Herod had silenced God's voice, and there was nothing left for him but divine judgment.

Barabbas deserved to die but was set free because Jesus took his place. Did Barabbas go to Calvary and look at the Man who died for him? Probably not. He was glad to be free from the sentence of death so he could return to his old ways. He was free but still in the bondage of sin.

And for those people—and many more—Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (v. 34). What grace!

The thief exercised great faith when he asked Jesus to remember him, for Jesus did not look like He was able to save anybody.

Joseph exercised great courage when he openly took our Lord's body from the cross. He defiled himself for Passover week, but it made no difference: he had met the Lamb of God, and that was all that mattered.

LUKE 24

Forgetting His word (1–12). The stone was rolled away, the body of Jesus was gone, and the women were perplexed. Why? Because they had forgotten His word. Today, angels do not come to remind us of His word; the Holy Spirit has that ministry (John 14:26). Yield to the Spirit and let Him remind you of the promises that will encourage your heart.

Learning the Word (13–35). Those two men could have walked and talked for days and never gotten rid of their disappointment. Why? Because they lacked the key that unlocks the Old Testament: Messiah must suffer and die before entering His glory. Their hearts burned as they heard Him teach the Scriptures; and soon, the mourners became missionaries and shared the good news with others. Do you allow the Holy Spirit to teach you (John 16:13–15)?

Receiving the Word (36–45). Their hearts were troubled, frightened, and doubtful; yet the Lord lovingly reassured them with His word. We today cannot see or feel His body, but we have the Holy Spirit to make Him real to us from the Scriptures. When your heart is troubled or frightened, see Jesus in the Word (John 14:1–6). When your faith is weak, see Jesus in the Word (Rom. 10:17). The first step toward peace is receiving the Word.

Sharing the Word (46–53). God opens our eyes (v. 31) and opens our understanding (v. 45) so that when He opens the Scriptures to us (vv. 27, 32), we may open our mouths and tell others about Him (v. 48). Jesus gives us the commission, the power, and the message. There is no reason to be silent! When we experience joyful worship (vv. 52–53), we will have little problem giving the world a joyful witness.

JOHN

John had two purposes in mind when he wrote his gospel: to prove that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and to invite people to believe in Him and be saved (20:30–31). His evidence for the deity of Jesus Christ is threefold: (1) the miracles He performed; (2) the words He spoke; and (3) the testimony of witnesses who knew Him.

As you read the gospel of John, you will hear Jesus speak (7:46), see Him act in power, and watch people respond to what He says and does. Seven witnesses declare that He is the Son of God: John the Baptist (1:34), Nathanael (1:49), Peter (6:69), a man who had been blind (9:35–38), Martha (11:27), Thomas (20:28), and the apostle John (20:31). Jesus also declared His deity (5:25; 10:36).

Matthew wrote for the Jews, Mark for the Romans, and Luke for the Greeks. However, John had the whole world in mind when he wrote and frequently used the word *world*. But he alludes to the Old Testament over one hundred times, showing that he was mindful of his Jewish readers.

The invitation in the synoptic Gospels is, "Come and hear!" But in the Gospel of John, the invitation is also, "Come and see!" There are sixty-seven references in the book to seeing and fifty-eight to hearing. His *works* and His *words* prove that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

After the introduction (1:1–18), John describes the ministry of Christ to His people (1:19—12:50), to His disciples (chaps. 13—17), and then to the whole world (chaps. 18—21). In the first section, He is the Miracle Worker; in the second, the Teacher; and in the third, the Victor. Of course, throughout the book, Jesus is seen as Savior and Lord.

JOHN 1

The Creator came (1–14). Compare this passage with Genesis 1 and note the emphasis on *light* and *life*. Moses wrote about the old creation, but John wrote about the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Jesus is the creative Word and the living Word who reveals the Father to us. In His many miracles, Jesus showed His power as Creator. He is a faithful Creator, and you can trust your life to Him (1 Pet. 4:19).

The Savior came (15–34). He came with grace and truth, not law and judgment. He revealed the Father and gave the Holy Spirit to those who trusted Him. He is the Lamb of God who alone can take away sins. The blood of lambs *covered* the sins of *the Jews*, but the blood of Christ *takes away* the sins of *the whole world* (v. 29; 4:42).

The Master came (35–51). Jesus called a few men to follow Him, and He transformed their lives and used them to transform the lives of others. Simon's new name (Peter, meaning "a stone") symbolized a new beginning in his life. He became a part of the new creation, sharing in the fullness of grace (v. 16). Jesus calls each one individually and uses different approaches, but the same Master calls. Have you heeded His call?

Images of Jesus

John pictures our Lord's death as the slaying of the lamb (1:29), the destroying of a temple (2:19), the lifting up of a serpent (3:14), the voluntary death of a shepherd (10:11–18), and the planting of a seed (12:20–25).

The King came (49). Jesus came to His own creation and everything in creation obeyed Him; but His own people did not receive Him (v. 11; 12:37–41). During His trial before Pilate, His kingship was the paramount issue (18:33—19:22); and it is still the issue today. Who is the king of *your* life?

JOHN 2

Look at Jesus!

He is joyous (1–12). A Jewish wedding is a joyful event, and Jesus was very much at home there. He was "a man of sorrows" (Isa. 53:3), but He also experienced great joy (Luke 10:21); and He can share the joys and sorrows (chap. 11) of our lives. The joy the world offers will eventually fail, but the joy He supplies goes on forever. Be sure to invite Him, and be sure to obey what He says.

He is righteous (13–17). The other gospels record His cleansing of the temple at the close of His ministry, but John tells us He started His ministry by cleansing the temple. Judgment begins at the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17). The temple was then "a house of merchandise" (v. 16); three years later, it was a "den of thieves" (Matt. 21:13). Outward reformation without inward renewal is a temporary thing.

He is victorious (18–25). The Jews repeatedly asked Him for a sign (1 Cor. 1:22) and then rejected the evidence He provided (12:37–41). His resurrection was the greatest proof of His deity (Matt. 12:38–40), but the Jews did not understand what He was talking about (8:42–45). They would destroy the temple by crucifying Him, but He would triumph over them in His resurrection.

Understanding Divine Truths

In his gospel, John points out that unsaved people did not understand what Jesus taught. When He used symbolic language to illustrate a spiritual truth, they took it literally. That was true when He spoke about the temple (2:18–22), the new birth (3:1–9), living water (4:7–15), and eating His flesh and drinking His blood (6:51–52). Apart from the Spirit, you cannot understand His Word (1 Cor. 2:6–16).

Miraculous Works

Out of the many miracles Jesus performed, John selected seven to reveal His glory and prove His deity: turning water into wine (2:1–11); healing the nobleman's son (4:46–54); healing the man sick for thirty-eight years (chap. 5); feeding the five thousand (6:1–14); walking on the stormy sea (6:15–21); restoring sight to a man born blind (chap. 9); and raising Lazarus from the dead (chap. 11). The catch of fish (chap. 21), was performed after His resurrection.

JOHN 3

A birth from above (1–9). In our first birth, we are "born of the flesh" and "born of water"; but in our second birth, we are "born from above [again]" and "born of the Spirit." Our first birth leads to death, but our second birth brings eternal life. The new birth is a new beginning that results in "newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

A Savior from above (10–21). Jesus is the Son of God come down from heaven. He is the serpent Moses wrote about (Num. 21:4–9); He is the Father's love gift (v. 16); He is the Light in a dark world (v. 19). Like the serpent, He was lifted up, and He died on a cross for the sins of the world. All who look to Him by faith receive eternal life.

A witness from above (22–36). John's ministry was given to him from heaven (v. 27). His task was to bear witness to Jesus (1:6–8). Jesus is the Word, and John was only a voice proclaiming the Word (1:23). Jesus is the Bridegroom, but John was only the best man. John did no miracles, but his witness was used to win people to Christ, even after he was dead (10:40–42). Can you honestly say, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (v. 30)?

Nicodemus

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, but he finally came out into the light and identified with the Lord Jesus (19:38–42). Nicodemus gave Jesus an honest hearing (7:45–52), examined the Word, and became a believer.

JOHN 4

Thirst (1–26). Because Jesus was truly human, He experienced weariness, hunger, and thirst, but His deepest desire was for the salvation of the sinful woman. He forgot His physical needs and concentrated on her spiritual needs. Patiently He revealed Himself to her: "a Jew" (v. 9), "greater than Jacob" (v. 12), "a prophet" (v. 19), "Messiah" (vv. 25, 29). She believed in Him, and her life was so changed that she immediately shared the good news with others (20:30–31).

Hunger (27–42). The will of God should be food that nourishes us, not medicine that upsets us. The disciples were satisfied with material food, but Jesus wanted the satisfying spiritual food from God. The will of God gives us the strength we need to do our job in the great harvest all around us.

Health (43–54). Salvation is to the inner person what health is to the body. The boy would have died had Jesus not intervened and given him health. The father *heard* (v. 47), *believed* (v. 50), and *knew* (v. 53), which is a normal Christian experience.

Jesus won the woman; the woman won many Samaritans; and the father won his whole household. Are you busy in the harvest?

JOHN 5

Works (vv. 1–21). The Father "broke" His Sabbath rest to help two sinners (Gen. 3:8ff.), and Jesus followed His example. In the world of nature, the Father is healing bodies, multiplying food, turning water into wine, and so forth; but He takes

longer to do those things. Our Lord's miracles are the Father's works done instantly. Whether instantly or gradually, they are wonderful works of God.

Wrath (22, 24–30). Today, Jesus is the Savior; tomorrow, He will be the Judge (Rev. 20:11–15). Even death cannot keep lost sinners from the judgment, for He will raise them from the dead. There is no escape, except faith in Jesus Christ (5:24).

Worship (23). If you worship God the Father, you must also worship the Son; and if you dishonor the Son, you dishonor the Father. Those who claim to worship God but ignore the Son are not even worshiping God! They are only fooling themselves.

Witness (31–47). How can anyone deny that Jesus is the Son of God when so many witnesses affirm that He is: John the Baptist (vv. 31–35), the miracles (v. 36), the Father (v. 37; Mark 1:11), and the Scriptures (vv. 38–39)? But when people believe on Him, they have the witness within themselves (vv. 39–47; 1 John 5:9–13).

JOHN 6

The disciples faced three tests because of the great crowds that followed Jesus.

Feeding the multitude (1–14). Philip thought the answer was money, but Andrew saw the answer in a lad with a lunch. When you face a seemingly unsolvable problem, claim the promise of verse 6, give what you have to Jesus, and let Him tell you what to do.

Leaving the multitude (15–21). This incident occurred at the high point of our Lord's popularity. The disciples (especially Judas) would have welcomed a kingdom, so Jesus sent them away into a storm. They went from popularity to peril, but they were safer in the storm than with the multitude; and Jesus came to them and met their needs (Isa. 43:2). Can you obey His will even when you disagree with Him?

Losing the multitude (22–71). People want the Lord to meet their physical needs but not their spiritual needs. The manna (Exod. 16) came only to the Jews and *sustained* physical life, but Jesus came for the whole world and *gives* eternal life. Just as you take food into your body, so you take Christ into your

life; and He becomes one with you. The disciples had opportunity to follow the crowd, but they remained with Jesus.

JOHN 7

How the world thinks (1–9). Because He was doing the Father's will, Jesus lived on a divine timetable (v. 30; 2:4; 8:20; 13:1), and so should we (Ps. 31:14–15). The world does not understand this and will give you advice contrary to God's will. Live on God's schedule and you will always have God's help.

How the world decides (10–36). This discussion reveals the confusion and unbelief of the people. Some were for Him because of His miracles, while others opposed Him because He broke the Sabbath laws. Some waited to see what their leaders would do (v. 26), and their leaders wanted to kill Him. They were judging by appearances (v. 24) and going astray.

What the world needs (37–53). One ritual during the Feast of Tabernacles was the pouring out of water in the temple. It was a reminder that God gave Israel water in the wilderness. Water for drinking pictures the Holy Spirit who is given to those who trust Christ. The world is thirsty and can find its thirst quenched only by coming to Christ.

Life

Life *is a key theme in John's gospel; he uses the word nearly fifty times. Jesus is the life (14:6), the light of life (1:4; 8:12), and the bread of life (6:48); and He gives the water of life (7:37–39). Jesus laid down His life so that we might have life (10:14–18, 27–30).*

JOHN 8

Condemnation (1–11). The woman was guilty, but where was the man? Both of them deserved to die (Lev. 20:10). It was a trap and Jesus knew it, but He ended up trapping the trap-

pers. Did He write on the ground to remind them that He had written the Law (Exod. 31:18) or to refer them to Jeremiah 17:13 (see Luke 10:20)? Here is our wonderful assurance: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

Illumination (12–29). The religious leaders did not know where they were going or where He was going because they were in the dark spiritually. They had the light of the Law (v. 5; Prov. 6:23) and of conscience (v. 9), but they did not have the light of life. Consequently, they did not know the Father or understand what Jesus taught them.

Liberation (30–59). The people were in bondage to Rome and to the Law of Moses, yet they said they were free! In verse 35, Jesus may have been referring to Isaac and Ishmael (Gen. 21:8–21), since the Jews had mentioned Abraham (v. 33). The Son makes you free (v. 36), so trust Him and follow Him. His truth makes you free (v. 32), so study it, believe it, and obey it. Satan imposes slavery that seems like freedom (2 Pet. 2:19); Jesus gives you a yoke that sets you free (Matt. 11:28–30).

Whose Child Are You?

There is no record that Jesus ever called the publicans and sinners "children of the devil." He reserved that title for the hypocritical Pharisees. By nature, we are all "children of wrath"; and by choice, we become "children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:1–3). When you receive Jesus Christ, you become a child of God (John 1:12–13). But if you reject Christ and have a false righteousness (Rom. 9:30—10:13), you are in danger of becoming a "child of the devil," for Satan is an imitator (2 Cor. 11:13–15). If Satan becomes your father, hell will be your home.

JOHN 9

Irritation (1–12). By putting clay on the man's eyes, Jesus encouraged him to obey and wash on the Sabbath. Sometimes the Lord irritates us before He illuminates us. His power is so great that He can use common things like dirt and water to produce a miracle. The man could hear but not see, and the Word produced faith (Rom. 10:17).

Interrogation (13–34). The man was questioned by the neighbors (v. 10) and by the Pharisees (vv. 15, 19, 26). Instead of seeking the truth and the freedom it brings (8:32), the Pharisees denied the truth and ended up in worse bondage. If we ask questions sincerely, with a willingness to obey, the Lord will lead us to the truth (7:17). If we are not honest with God, He will never show us His light.

Identification (35–41). The Pharisees were false shepherds who threw the man out, but Jesus the Good Shepherd took him in! The man knew that He was "a Man called Jesus" (v. 11), "a prophet" (v. 17), and "a Man of God" (v. 33); but he needed to learn that He is "the Son of God" (v. 35). He believed and was saved. Beware a spiritual experience that comes short of true salvation.

JOHN 10

God's people are His flock (Ps. 100:3; Acts 20:28), and they must beware strangers (v. 5), thieves (vv. 1, 10), and hirelings (v. 12). Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep (vv. 14–15) and speaks to them (v. 27), so He is not like the strangers. He protects the sheep (vv. 28–29), so He is not like the thieves; and He gives His life for the sheep, so He is not like the hirelings who run away from danger (vv. 11–13).

When you trust the Good Shepherd, He leads you out of the wrong fold and into the right flock (vv. 3–4, 16). He goes before you and leads you by His Word (v. 4), and He leads you in and out to find spiritual nourishment (v. 9).

There are many churches but only "one flock and one shepherd" (v. 16). Is the Lord using you to bring the "other sheep" to Him?

In the Good Shepherd's Flock

Why does the Lord compare His people to sheep? They are prone to wander (Isa. 53:6) and need a shepherd to guide them. Sheep are clean animals (1 Pet. 2:25; 2 Pet. 2:20–22) and were used for sacrifices (Rom. 8:36; 12:1). They flock together (Acts 4:32) and are useful because they produce milk, lambs, and wool. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep intimately and calls them by name. He protects them and provides for them (Ps. 23). How wonderful to be one of His sheep!

JOHN 11

This experience was difficult for the Bethany family, but look at it in the light of God's love (vv. 3, 5, 36).

Love hears (1–3). The sisters sent their message to the Lord because they knew He was concerned about them. God's love keeps His ears open to our cries (Ps. 34:12–16).

Love waits (4–6). We think that love must act immediately, but sometimes delay brings a greater blessing. "God's delays are not God's denials." Jesus gave them a promise to encourage them while they waited (v. 4). The promise seemed to have failed, but Jesus knew what He was doing.

Love risks (7–16). It was dangerous for Jesus to return to Judea, but He went just the same. The raising of Lazarus helped to precipitate the plans that led to His death (vv. 45–57).

Love comforts (17–32). Jesus came to the sisters, listened to them, and assured them with His word. He cannot really help us until we move from "Lord, if . . ." (vv. 21, 32) to "Yes, Lord, I believe" (v. 27).

Love weeps (33–37). Jesus identifies with our sorrows (Heb.

4:15–16). He knew He would raise Lazarus from the dead, but He still wept with the sisters and their friends.

Love serves (38–44). We today are not able to raise the dead, but we can serve others as they go through the valley (Rom. 12:15). A loving heart will always find a way to bear others' burdens (Gal. 6:2).

"If God is at work week by week raising men from the dead, there will always be people coming to see how it is done. You cannot find an empty church that has conversion *for its leading feature. Do you want to know how to fill empty chapels? Here is the answer: Get your Lazarus."*

Samuel Chadwick, Methodist evangelist and educator (1860–1932)

JOHN 12

Fragrance (1–11). What would your plans be if you knew you had only six days to live? Jesus took time to visit dear friends and fellowship with them. Mary's adoration not only revealed her love, but it brought joy to His heart, exposed Judas's sin, and gave the church an example to follow. Are the places where you go filled with Christ's fragrance because of you (2 Cor. 2:15–16)?

Festival (12–19). Jesus took advantage of the large Passover crowd to present Himself as King (Zech. 9:9). He was forcing the Jewish leaders to act, for it was the Father's will that Jesus die on Passover. The crowd did not stay with Him. It is easier to shout in a parade than stand at a cross.

Fruitfulness (20–36). Jesus looked upon His death as an opportunity to glorify God (vv. 23, 28). Do you take that attitude when you face a time of trial? He saw Himself as a seed that

would die and produce fruit and as a conqueror who would defeat Satan (v. 31; Col. 2:14–15). The Cross would open the way of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles (v. 32).

Faithlessness (37–50). In His words and works, Jesus showed Israel the light, but they chose to walk in darkness. The praise of men meant more to them than the praise of God (5:44). Be careful what you do with His words because you will hear them again when you see the Savior (v. 48).

JOHN 13

What Jesus knew (1–11). Because of what Jesus knew, He did what He did: He washed the disciples' feet. Jesus knew where He came from and where He was going. He knew that the Father had given Him all things (3:35). If you have all things in your hand, you will have no problem picking up a towel (1 Cor. 3:21–23). Jesus taught them a lesson in fellowship and in keeping themselves clean before the Lord (1 John 1:5—2:1).

What the disciples knew (12–20). Jesus taught them a second lesson: true happiness comes from humble service. Jesus gave them an example that we must follow today (Phil. 2:1–11). Alas, soon after this lesson, the disciples began to argue over who was the greatest (Luke 22:24–30).

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the Father's gift to you, a gift that will never be taken back (John 14:16). The Spirit is a person, like the Father and the Son, and is God; and He dwells in God's people (14:17). He enables you to witness for Christ (15:26–27; Acts 1:8) and through your witness convicts the lost (16:7–11). He will teach you the Word (14:26) and use it in your life to glorify Christ (16:12–15).

What Judas knew (21–30). Jesus did not reveal Judas's secret; in fact, He treated him just like the others and they detected nothing amiss. What love that Jesus should not only protect the man who betrayed Him but even wash his feet! Jesus with the towel is the perfect example of humility; Judas with the bread is a perfect example of hypocrisy and treachery.

What the world must know (31–38). The distinguishing mark of true disciples is their love for one another (1 John 2:7–11), and it is the kind of love that the world can see. He commands us to love, and He gives us the power to obey (Rom. 5:5).

JOHN 14

No wonder the disciples were troubled (vv. 1, 27): Jesus was going to leave them, one of them would betray Him, and Peter would deny Him. Jesus encouraged them by telling them about Himself and the Father.

Jesus takes us to the Father (1–6). We have a home in heaven when life is over, and we shall meet Jesus and the Father. James M. Gray wrote, "Who could mind the journey when the road leads home?" Blessed assurance!

Jesus reveals the Father (7–11). In what He said (7:16) and did (5:19) during His earthly ministry, Jesus revealed the Father: "I and My Father are one" (10:30). How can we not love the Father when He is like Jesus?

Jesus glorifies the Father (12–18). He does it through His people as they do God's works and keep His commandments. Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit and prayer, we could never glorify the Lord.

Jesus and the Father dwell with us (19–31). It is one thing for us to go to heaven and quite something else for heaven to come to us! There is a deeper fellowship with the Son and the Father for those who love Him, seek Him, and obey Him. We experience His peace as we commune with the Father and the Son in love.

Jesus is the way to the Father; He reveals the truth about the Father; and He shares the life of the Father with us. Why should our hearts be troubled?

JOHN 15

His life (1–8). A branch is good for only one thing—bearing fruit. It may be weak in itself, but it has a living relationship with the vine and can be productive. To abide in Christ means to be in communion with Him so that our lives please Him. We know that we are abiding when the Father prunes us, cutting away the good so that we can produce the best. We glorify God with fruit, more fruit, much fruit.

His love (9–17). Abiding depends on obeying, and obeying depends on loving. Love and joy go together and make it easy for us to obey His will. We should love Him, love His will, and love one another. Note the "fruit of the Spirit": love (v. 10), joy (v. 11), and peace (14:27; Gal. 5:22).

His name (18–27). We enjoy the love of Christ and of the brethren, but we also must endure the hatred of the world for His name's sake. The more we are like Christ, the more the world system will oppose us. Depend on the Spirit's power and you will be a fruitful, faithful Christian (vv. 26–27).

JOHN 16

The world's opposition (1–15). The Lord warned them about the opposition that would come. Do not be surprised when you are persecuted by religious people (v. 2), for this has been going on ever since Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4; Luke 11:47–51). The Spirit helps us witness to the world and glorify Christ before the world (Acts 4:8ff.), so depend on Him.

The world's joy (16–24). When Jesus was arrested, crucified, and buried, the world system rejoiced because their Enemy was out of the way. But today He is alive, and we have every reason to rejoice! The Lord does not *replace* our sorrow with joy; He *transforms* our sorrow into joy. The same baby that gives the mother pain also gives her joy. The world's joy does not last, but the believer's joy is forever (Ps. 16:11).

The world's defeat (25–33). In the next few hours, the disciples would watch their world fall apart; and yet Jesus assured them that He was the winner. "I have overcome the world" is a fact, not a promise, and it applies to us today. We are overcomers through Him (1 John 5:1–5).

JOHN 17

In this, his high priestly prayer, Jesus prayed for Himself (vv. 1–5), His disciples (vv. 6–19), and all of His church (vv. 20–26).

The prayer reveals our Lord's spiritual priorities: glorifying the Father (v. 1), the unity of the church (vv. 21–23), the sanctity of the church (v. 17), and the winning of a lost world (vv. 18–19). Are these priorities in your life?

It also reveals the gifts He has given His people: eternal life (vv. 2–3), the Word (vv. 8, 14), and His glory (v. 22). But note that believers are the Father's gift to Him (vv. 2, 6, 9, 11–12), just as Jesus is the Father's love gift to us (3:16). It is all of grace!

The word *world* appears nineteen times in this prayer, for this prayer tells us how to "overcome the world" (16:33). We must seek God's glory first (vv. 1–5), experience His joy (v. 13), be sanctified by the Word (v. 17), seek to win the lost (vv. 18–19), and encourage the unity of God's people (vv. 20–23).

Judas the Lost

Judas was not a saved man, even though he was one of the Twelve. He never believed in Jesus (6:66–71) and therefore was never washed from his sins (13:11). He was not chosen by Christ (13:18) and therefore not kept (17:12). Judas is a frightening example of how near one can get to the kingdom and still be lost.

Glory is another key word. Christ laid aside His glory to come to earth (v. 5b), glorified God on earth (v. 4), and was glorified when He returned to heaven (v. 5a). Christ is glorified in His church (v. 10) and has shared His glory with the church (vv. 22, 24). We already have the glory; we are just waiting for it to be fully revealed (Rom. 8:18–21, 30).

The Scottish Reformer John Knox had this prayer read to him daily during his last illness. But you would benefit by

starting now to read it and meditate on it. What a treasury of truth it is!

JOHN 18

Judas depended on the strength of numbers, Peter on the strength of his arm, Annas and Caiaphas on the strength of their position, but Jesus on the strength of love and devotion to the Father. Jesus had a cup in His hand, not a sword, but that cup was His scepter. He was in complete control.

On the other hand, Peter fought when he should have yielded and followed when he should have fled. Yielding and fleeing looked like defeat, but they were the Father's will; and Peter should have obeyed. While Jesus was giving His witness to the high priest, Peter was denying the Lord. Which was the successful witness, Peter or Jesus?

As a Roman governor, Pilate was worried about the threat of another kingdom. Verse 36 is certainly a rebuke to believers who follow the example of Peter. At Pentecost, Peter wielded the sword of the Spirit and won a victory.

JOHN 19

The crown (1–16). Jesus and Pilate had been talking about a kingdom, so it was only right that the King have a crown. It was meant for mockery, but it preached a message, for Jesus was wearing the consequences of Adam's sins (Gen. 3:17–19). But a crown is a sign of victory. He has overcome!

The cross (17–27). Jesus started out bearing His own cross, but then Simon was drafted to carry it for Him (Mark 15:21). We are not told why, although tradition says that Jesus fell and could not carry it. Considering all He had been through, that is not difficult to believe. Criminals carried the cross as a sign of guilt, *and Jesus was not guilty!*

The conquest (28–42). "It is finished!" was the cry of a conqueror. Jesus accomplished what all of the old covenant sacrifices could not do (Heb. 10:1–18). The prophecies and types were fulfilled and the sacrifice for sins made once and for all forever. It was not a martyr that Joseph and Nicodemus put into the tomb; it was a victor.

Our Final Payment

The Greek word translated "It is finished!" was a familiar word in that day. Bankers used it when the final payment had been made on a debt. Jesus completely paid the debt we owed, and it will be remembered against us no more forever. Hallelujah, what a Savior!

JOHN 20

Confusion (1–10). Mary jumped to conclusions and soon had Peter and John on the run. They were busy, but they had nothing to say and were accomplishing little. They saw the evidence for the Resurrection, but it did not change their lives. They needed a meeting with the living Christ.

Love (11–18). Unbelief blinds our eyes to the Lord's presence. When He speaks His word to us, faith and love are rekindled. Mary was changed from a mourner to a missionary when she met the living Lord.

Peace (19–23). Locked doors will not give you peace, nor will they keep out your loving Savior. He comes with the message of peace based on His sacrifice on the cross (v. 20; Rom. 5:1).

Faith (24–31). The Lord tenderly deals with our doubts and unbelief. We today cannot see Him or feel His wounds, but we have the Word of God to assure us (vv. 9, 30–31). When your faith falters, do not ask for signs. Open His Word and let Him reassure you.

JOHN 21

Jesus the Stranger (1–4). When Peter returned to the old life, he took six other men with him. Their work was in vain (15:5) because the Lord was not with them. How kind He is to come to us when we have disobeyed Him and have failed in our work!

Jesus the Master (5–8). When Jesus takes charge, failure is turned into success; and the difference was only the width of the ship! You never know how close you are to victory, so admit your failure and obey what He tells you to do. He never fails.

Jesus the Host (9–14). It took six men to drag the net (v. 8), but Peter did it alone when Jesus gave the orders (v. 11). We should always remember that "God's commandment is God's enablement." Did the fire of coals remind Peter of his denials (18:18ff.)? Did the miraculous catch of fish remind him of his call to service (Luke 5:1–11)? How kind of Jesus to feed Peter before dealing with him about his sins!

Jesus the Shepherd (15–17). The most important thing in ministry is loving Christ, for all ministry flows from that. Peter the fisherman was also to be a shepherd and care for the lambs and sheep.

Jesus the Lord (18–25). By saying, "Follow Me," Jesus reinstated Peter as an apostle. But Peter turned around and took his eyes off the Lord (Matt. 14:30), and Jesus had to rebuke him. The next time you are tempted to meddle in somebody else's ministry, ponder Christ's words: "What is that to you? You follow Me!" (v. 22).

Peter followed the Lord right into the excitement of the book of Acts!

ACTS

Perhaps a better title is "The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Church." This story tells how God's people obeyed the Lord's commission to take the gospel to the whole world. Luke wrote it as a companion volume to his gospel (1:1–3; Luke 1:1–4), and it describes what Jesus *continued to do and teach* after He returned to heaven.

Peter's ministry dominates the first part of the book (chaps. 1—12), and then Luke focuses on Paul's ministry (chaps. 13—28). These two men had parallel experiences of both trial and ministry. Peter used the "keys" (Matt. 16:19) to open the door of faith to the Jews (chap. 2), the Samaritans (chap. 8), and the Gentiles (chap. 10); Paul took the good news to the Gentiles in the Roman Empire.

Acts 1:8 outlines the book, for the gospel went from Jerusalem (chaps. 1—7) to Judea and Samaria (chaps. 8—9) and then to the ends of the earth (chaps. 10—28). The book of Acts describes a transition from ministry to Jews to ministry to the Gentiles and explains how the gospel got from Jerusalem to Rome.

This book is for every Christian who wants to experience the power of the Holy Spirit and be a witness for Jesus Christ "to the end of the earth" (1:8). Ask God what part He wants you to play in taking the gospel to the whole world, starting right where you are. "Lord, what do You want me to do?" (9:6).

ACTS 1

One hundred and twenty ordinary people hardly constitute an imposing army; but in a few days, they would make an impact that is being felt even today. The same resources God gave them are still available to us.

A living Lord (1–3). Christ is the Head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15) and supplies life to His body, giving dynamic and direction to His people. What He began to do and teach, the church continues as He guides and empowers through His Spirit.

The power of the Spirit (4–8). God's power is available to God's people who want to do His will and be His witnesses. You do not have to be an apostle to have the power of the Spirit in your life (Eph. 5:18).

The promise of His return (9–11). He is the Lord of history, working out His purposes in this world. The church may lose some battles, but we will win the war!

Trust God's Guidance

If we are faithful to read God's Word, study it, meditate on it, and obey it, God will guide us when we have decisions to make. The Holy Spirit teaches us (John 14:26; 16:13–14) and directs us when we pray and seek the Lord's will. The Holy Spirit uses truth, not ignorance; so the more facts we have, the better. We should use our common sense but not lean on it (Prov. 3:5–6), for we walk by faith and not by sight. If we sincerely move in the wrong direction, the Lord will show us (Acts 16:6–10; Phil. 3:15), so we need not fear. It is good for believers to read the Word and pray together as they seek the mind of the Lord.

The power of prayer (12–14, 24–26). God shares His power with us as we pray and ask Him for His help. Throughout Acts, notice Luke's emphasis on prayer. The first church was a praying church.

The guidance of Scripture (15–23). His Word is still our lamp and light (Ps. 119:105), and we must obey what it says. God guides His people when they are willing to follow.

ACTS 2

The Spirit came, not because the believers prayed but because the day of Pentecost had come, the day appointed for the "birthday of the church" (Lev. 23:15–21). He baptized the believers into one body (1 Cor. 12:13) so that they had a living connection with their Head exalted in heaven. Luke 2 describes the birth of the Lord's *physical* body and Acts 2 the birth of His *spiritual* body.

The Spirit also filled the believers and empowered them for witness. He gave Peter insight into the Word and the ability to show men Christ in the Word. The Spirit used the witness of the church to convict the lost, just as Jesus said He would do (16:7–10).

The Gift of Tongues

The believers praised God in "other tongues," that is, known languages understood by the people present (Acts 2:6–11). The apostles worshiped and praised God in tongues (v. 11) but preached the gospel in Aramaic, a tongue the Jews could understand. During the transition in ministry from Jews to Gentiles, each time Peter used the "keys," the gift of tongues was evident: among the Jews (2:1–4), the Samaritans (8:14ff.), and the Gentiles (10:44–48). Not all believers speak in tongues (1 Cor. 12:30), and it is not identified as one of the most important gifts (1 Cor. 12:7–11).

But the same Holy Spirit assisted the believers in their church fellowship (vv. 40–47). The original group was outnumbered by the new believers, but there was still harmony in the church family. They worshiped daily and witnessed daily, and "the Lord added to the church daily" (v. 47). Is your experience with the Lord a *daily* one?

ACTS 3

Priorities. Peter and John were not so caught up with large crowds that they had no time for individuals. Nor were they so busy in ministry that they could not pray. They had learned their lessons well from the Lord Jesus (Mark 1:35; Luke 8:40ff.).

Power. The emphasis in chapters 3—4 is on the name of Jesus (3:6, 13, 16, 20, 26; 4:2, 7, 10, 12, 17–18), the name above every name (Phil. 2:9–11). Faith in the name of Jesus releases power so that lives are changed. To pray or minister in His name means to ask or act on His authority (Matt. 28:18–20) so that He alone gets the glory.

Proclamation. At Pentecost, the sound of a rushing wind drew the crowd (2:2, 6); but here the witness of a changed life brought the people together. Thus, Peter had the opportunity to preach, and two thousand people were converted. Reach out to the individual (v. 7) and God will give you opportunities for a bigger harvest (John 4:28ff.).

"*It's the individual touch that tells. He [Jesus] doesn't love in the mass, but in ones.*"

Amy Carmichael

ACTS 4

In his sermon at Pentecost, Peter proved from the Scriptures that Jesus was alive; but now he proved it by the miraculous change in the beggar's life. The man was healed through

the power of the name of Jesus. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection (23:6–8), so they wanted to put a stop to the ministry of the apostles. This was the beginning of the official persecution of Christians.

What do you do when they tell you to stop sharing the gospel? What did the apostles do? Certainly they recalled the words of Jesus Christ (Matt. 10:16–26) and depended on the Holy Spirit to help them. Furthermore, they were so filled with their message and with love for Christ that they could not stop telling people about Him!

They depended on prayer (vv. 23–31) and directed their prayer to a sovereign God who made everything and can do anything. They based their petitions on Psalm 2, a marvelous psalm to read when you are being attacked.

When you are "let go," where do you go (v. 23)? When you are in trouble, to whom do you turn?

ACTS 5

Pretending (1–11). Barnabas's gift (4:36–37) exposed the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, just as Mary's gift exposed Judas's sin (John 12). The couple lied to the Spirit, to the church, and to Peter; and it cost them their lives. Their sin was not in taking money from God but in pretending to be something they were not.

Obeying (12–16). Dealing with sin in the church often results in new power for the church. Can you imagine a church so spiritual that people were afraid to join with them? Even Peter's shadow had power!

"We make our decisions, and then our decisions turn around and make us."

F. W. Boreham

Opposing (17–32). Because the Sadducees could not tolerate evidences of resurrection power, they arrested the apostles again and told them to be quiet. "We ought to obey God

rather than men" (v. 29) is the only position to hold when you have the Word of God on your side. Be sure it is conviction and not just opinion.

Hesitating (33–42). Gamaliel advised neutrality, which means avoiding the truth and letting Satan move in (Matt. 12:30, 43–45). With all the evidence they had seen, the council's neutrality was actually dishonesty. If you followed Gamaliel's advice in any area of life—science, cooking, finance—it would lead to paralysis and then death.

"There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision."

William James

ACTS 6

When you yield yourself to do God's will, you never know what challenges you will face.

Serving tables (1–7). No ministry is unimportant for a Christlike servant, for Jesus said, "I am among you as the One who serves" (Luke 22:27). In serving tables, the men released the apostles for their ministry of prayer and the Word; and the result was an increase in conversions (v. 7). People filled with the Spirit see no small jobs or big places. They see only their Master and the opportunity to glorify Him.

Doing wonders (8). From serving tables to doing miracles! Stephen reached out to the lost and sought to win them to Christ. If you are faithful with a few things, the Lord may give you many things (Matt. 25:21).

Facing enemies (9–15). The unbelievers treated Stephen the way the Sanhedrin treated Jesus: they arrested him on trumped-up charges and hired false witnesses to testify. Stephen experienced "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil. 3:10), and so will you if your witness hits home (Matt. 5:11–12). They said Stephen was opposing Moses, but he had a shining face just like Moses (Exod. 34)!

Tradition or Truth?

They accused Stephen of being unorthodox in his beliefs (Acts 6:13); but yesterday's orthodoxy had become today's heresy, and the council was behind the times! The Law had been nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14), and the veil of the temple had been torn in two. Within a few years, both the city and the temple would be gone, and Hosea 3:4 would be fulfilled. Are you following man's tradition or God's truth?

"There are many of us that are willing to do great things for the Lord; but few of us are willing to do little things."

D. L. Moody

ACTS 7

The main thrust of Stephen's message is that Israel always resisted the truth and rejected the deliverers God sent to them. They opposed Moses and repeatedly wanted to return to Egypt. They opposed Joseph, and he later became their redeemer! They rejected the many prophets God sent to warn them and call them back to His way. Finally, they rejected their own Messiah and crucified Him.

Israel's history reveals the patience of God and the hardness of man's heart. But it also reveals a ray of hope: Israel rejected their deliverers the first time *but accepted them the second time.* That was true of Moses and Joseph, and it will be true of Jesus when He returns (Zech. 12:10).

Stephen's death was the third murder in Israel's history and a turning point in God's dealings with the nation. They had rejected the Father when they allowed John the Baptist to be slain; they had rejected the Son when they asked for Jesus to be crucified; and now they had rejected the Holy Spirit. There could be no more forgiveness (Matt. 12:31–32). The line had been crossed, and the gospel moved out to Judea and Samaria.

Stephen *The name* Stephen *means "a crown," and he won the crown of life because he was faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10).*

ACTS 8

The death of Stephen seemed to be a defeat for the church, but it resulted in some great victories for the Lord. Wherever the believers went, they shared the gospel and many trusted the Savior (vv. 1–7; 11:19). Stephen's witness made a tremendous impression on Saul and was instrumental in his conversion (22:20). Never give up when the enemy seems to be winning. It may be your finest hour of victory.

"I live for souls and for eternity, I want to win some soul to Christ. If you want this and work for it, eternity alone can tell the result."

D. L. Moody

Like Stephen, Philip was a deacon who was also an evangelist; and God led him to witness in Samaria to people hostile to the Jews (John 4:9). The coming of Peter and John and the giving of the Holy Spirit linked the Samaritan believers to the

saints in Jerusalem and the ancient division was healed. The way to turn enemies into friends is to make them brothers and sisters in Christ.

In times of great blessing, wherever God sows true seed, the devil sows a counterfeit (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). Like Peter, we must be alert and exercise discernment.

Philip left a great harvest to talk to one man, but that is the mark of a true servant of the Lord. We must go where God sends us, do what God tells us, and leave the results with Him.

ACTS 9

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus was a turning point in the church's history, and God used several people to touch his life. We remember Paul and are prone to forget the people who helped him get started.

The witness of Stephen was significant (22:20) as were the testimonies and prayers of persons Saul persecuted (Matt. 5:44). Ananias baptized him and encouraged him, and the disciples at Damascus saved his life. When the church in Jerusalem feared to welcome Saul into their fellowship, Barnabas ("son of encouragement") built the bridge. Barnabas later enlisted Saul to serve in the Antioch church (11:25–26) and traveled with him in evangelistic ministry among the Gentiles (13:1–3).

You may not be called to a prominent work as Saul was, but you can do the job God has called you to do and be an encouragement to others. We do not know the names of the brave men who smuggled Saul out of Damascus (v. 25), but holding the ropes was an important job!

ACTS 10

Peter uses the "keys" for the third and last time as he opens the door of faith to the Gentiles. How wonderful is the providence of God! Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was being prepared for his life's work; and Peter was about to break down the ancient barriers between Jews and Gentiles: "Known to God from eternity are all His works" (15:18).

But God had to prepare both Peter and Cornelius. He

spoke to Cornelius while he was praying and to Peter while he was relaxing. Be alert to the voice of God; you never know when He may have a word for you.

"Not so, Lord! For I have never . . ." (v. 14) is the response that leads to defeat. God was about to do a new thing, and Peter wanted to hold on to the old. He calls Him Lord but refuses to obey Him! Yet God tenderly instructed Peter, and the apostle surrendered to His will.

Peter did not get to finish his sermon. When he said, "Whosoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins" (v. 43), they believed and were saved. What a great way to stop a sermon!

"You can say 'Lord,' and you can say 'Not so,' but you cannot say, 'Not so, Lord.'"

W. Graham Scroggie

ACTS 11

Some people make things happen. Peter was available to the Lord, and God used him to officially bring gentile believers into the church. The wall between Jews and Gentiles had been broken down (Eph. 2:11ff.)! The news was astounding to the Jewish believers, for they thought the Gentiles must first become Jewish proselytes before they could become Christians. Thank God that Peter was the kind of person who makes things happen!

Some people hear that things happen. This category may include most of us, but how do you respond when you hear that God has done something new? Do you sincerely try to get the facts, or do you depend on hearsay? We are to "test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:22).

Some people oppose things happening. The legalistic members of the Jerusalem assembly attacked Peter for eating with the Gentiles, so he explained how God had led. He proved from Scripture (v. 16; 1:5) that what happened was the will of God, and his explanation silenced his critics for the time. How-

ever, the legalistic element in the church would rise again (chap. 15) and seek to limit the freedom of the gospel.

Some people help other people make things happen. Barnabas enlisted Saul (vv. 25–26) and put him to work in the Antioch church, which led to their going together to the Gentiles with the message of salvation. Barnabas lived up to his name of "son of encouragement."

He Worked for the Great Physician

John Calvin's physician told him to stop working or he would die, and Calvin replied, "Would you have my Master come and find me loitering?"

ACTS 12

The will of the Lord is always wise and good, but it is not always predictable. God spared Peter but allowed James to be killed. He did not deliver Peter from prison until the last minute. He allowed Herod to slay James, but He did not permit the king to act like a god. Is that how *you* would have done it?

Some Christians are like Job's friends: they think they always know exactly what God is doing, will do, and wants done; but they may be wrong. Whenever you are tempted to "play God" in somebody's life, ponder Isaiah 55:8–9.

It is always right to pray, even if your faith is so weak you are surprised when the answer comes! Keep knocking—God opens doors.

ACTS 13

Opportunities come to people busy serving the Lord. God calls people who take time to worship and minister to the Lord. If you want God's guidance, get busy where you are, and He will show you the next step.

Opportunities usually produce opposition (1 Cor. 16:9).

Here is another example of the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43): God sowed the good seed (Paul and Barnabas), and Satan sowed a counterfeit.

Opportunities reveal character. Paul and Barnabas kept going, but John Mark returned home. We do not know why, nor should we pass judgment (1 Cor. 10:12). Barnabas reclaimed John Mark (15:36–41) and Paul eventually accepted him (2 Tim. 4:11).

Opportunities develop leadership. The trip began with "Barnabas and Saul" (v. 2), but it became "Paul and his party" (v. 13). Barnabas rejoiced to see Paul being used so mightily of God (Rom. 12:9–11). It was a team effort, and the vital thing was the glory of God.

His Word Endures Forever

Note the emphasis in Acts 13 on the Word of God (vv. 5, 7, 15, 26, 44, 46, 48–49). In his preaching, Paul quoted from 1 Samuel, Isaiah, Habakkuk, and Psalms. He preached salvation by faith in Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead (vv. 38–39). Our words do not last, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.

ACTS 14

Paul was a man on the move but not a man easily moved because of difficulties. "But none of these things move me" was his testimony of faith (20:24), and he lived it.

When he and Barnabas were expelled from Antioch in Pisidia, they shook off the dust of their feet and went to Iconium (13:50–52; Luke 10:11). When the people there tried to stone them, they went to Lystra where they were treated like gods! (That was a greater danger than persecution.) Crowds are fickle: they changed their minds and stoned Paul, but he just got up and went to Derbe.

That was not all. Paul and Barnabas had the courage to retrace their steps so they could help and encourage the new Christians! And when they returned home, they told the church what the Lord had done, not what they had suffered.

Paul and Barnabas put Christ first, others second, and themselves last. They had a job to do, and they were determined by God's grace to do it. How much does it take to move you out of the will of God?

"The will to persevere is often the difference between failure and success."

David Sarnoff

ACTS 15

When God opens a door (14:27), the enemy has somebody handy to try to close it. In this case, the legalists from Judea visited the Antioch church and taught that Gentiles must become Jews before they can be Christians. Their teaching was a denial of salvation by grace through faith (10:43; Eph. 2:8–9).

It was difficult for the orthodox Jews to see that their glorious religious system, given by God, had been fulfilled in Christ and was now out-of-date. (That is why the book of Hebrews was written.) Rather than abandon it, they tried to blend the old religion with the new (Matt. 9:14–17).

When sincere Christians disagree, they must get together, see what God is doing in His church, and find out what the Word has to say about it. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas told what God was doing among the Gentiles, and James related it to the Word (Amos 9:11–12).

In the decision, there was no compromise doctrinally, but there was consideration practically. In the decree, the church asked the Gentiles not to deliberately offend the Jews. You will find the expansion of this principle, the basic principle of love, in Romans 14—15 and 1 Corinthians 8—10.

ACTS 16

Paul wrote, "But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience" (2 Cor. 6:4). See the patience of Paul . . .

In waiting for a helper (1–5). Timothy replaced John Mark and became a true son in the faith to Paul. God has the right person ready at the right time, so be patient.

In seeking God's will (6–10). He was an apostle, yet he did not always know the direction God wanted him to take. He took steps, God closed doors, so he waited; and then God showed him the way.

In ministering the Word (11–15). They waited "some days" before seeking a place to witness, and God had hearts all prepared.

In bearing annoyance (16–18). Paul put up with the demonic promotion as long as he could and then cast out the demon. Paul knew that his action would create problems for him, and it did.

In enduring suffering (19–25). Paul did not use his Roman citizenship to protect himself from pain (22:22–29), but later he used it to protect the new church (vv. 35–40). When you hurt, ask God to give you songs in the night (Ps. 42:8).

In winning a lost soul (26–34). Paul had his eyes on the keeper of the prison and in kindness won him to Christ. How much are we willing to suffer to win someone to the Lord, especially someone who has hurt us?

"Patience is power. With time and patience, the mulberry leaf becomes silk."

Chinese Proverb

ACTS 17

Rejecting the new (1–9). The Jews in Thessalonica were not interested in the new faith or the "new king" that Paul preached, but the Gentile "God seekers" accepted the gospel

and were saved. Read 1 Thessalonians 1 to see the change they experienced.

Investigating the new (10–15). The next town was just the opposite! The Jews in Berea took time to examine the evidence and study the Scriptures. There are fair-minded people in every nation, and God knows who they are.

Looking for the new (16–34). The people in Athens "spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing" (v. 21). How like our world today! The quest for novelty overshadows the search for reality. Paul's sermon was a masterpiece of tact and teaching, and a few people were converted. Paul offered them "newness of life" through the Resurrection (Rom. 6:4), and most of the listeners rejected it.

ACTS 18

The tentmaker (1–3). All Jewish rabbis had a trade because they did not charge their pupils for their lessons. Paul worked hard to support himself and his associates in their ministry. He also worked so that the unsaved could not accuse him of preaching the gospel just to make money (1 Cor. 9). What sacrifices do we make today to further the gospel?

The watchman (4–6). The image is from Ezekiel 3:16–21. As a faithful watchman, Paul warned sinners of the wrath to come, so his hands were free from their blood.

He Is with Us

"I am with you" is a promise God gave to Isaac (Gen. 26:24), Jacob (Gen. 28:15), the Jewish remnant returning from Babylon (Isa. 41:10; 43:5), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8, 19; 15:20), and the Jews rebuilding the temple (Hag. 1:13; 2:4); and Jesus gave it to us (Matt. 28:20). He said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

The evangelist (7–10). Paul moved next door to the synagogue and kept witnessing! He was not one to run away from either the battlefield or the harvestfield. The Lord promised, "I am with you" (v. 10), a promise He gave to many people and still gives to us today (Isa. 41:10; Matt. 28:20).

A Godly Couple

Aquila and Priscilla, husband and wife, appear several times in apostolic history and were important workers in the early church. They are always mentioned together because they were a team. Being Jews, they were expelled from Rome; as a result, they met Paul in Corinth and opened their home to him. Paul left them in Ephesus where they helped Apollos better understand the gospel (Acts 18:18–28). They returned to Rome where they had a church in their home (Rom. 16:3–5). We do not know how they risked their lives for Paul; but their actions show how much they loved him. They were with Paul in Ephesus when he wrote 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:8, 19), so perhaps it had something to do with the riot described in Acts 19. In his last epistle, Paul sent loving greetings to them (2 Tim. 4:19). Every pastor is grateful to God for couples like Priscilla and Aquila whose hearts, hands, and homes are completely given to the Lord.

The builder (11–28). Paul did not just win souls; he also built a local church by teaching the converts the Word of God

(1 Cor. 3:9–23). In fact, he followed the commission of Matthew 28:18–20. After reporting to his home base in Antioch, Paul revisited some churches to build them up in the faith.

ACTS 19

We read in this chapter that "the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (v. 20). When does this happen?

When we confirm our faith (1–10). When you believe in Jesus Christ, you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:43–48; Rom. 8:9). Many people think they are converted but do not have the Spirit's witness within (1 John 5:9–13). Paul could not build a church on men with an inadequate spiritual experience, nor can we today. We must be honest with God.

When we confess our sins (11–20). The devil is a great imitator, but in this case, his attempt was a humiliating failure. The Lord used it for good, because the believers became convicted about their secret sins and confessed them. Then the Spirit could work in mighty power, and the Word increased!

When we confront the enemy (21–41). Paul did not openly attack their idolatry by picketing the temple of Diana or petitioning the city government. He simply shared the Word, and lives were changed. Of course, the real issue was money, not religion. Paul was wise not to go into the theater, although we admire him for his courage. But the riot only called attention to the gospel and gave the believers more opportunity to witness.

Circumstances that look like obstacles are really opportunities when you let God work.

ACTS 20

The uproars usually cease, so be patient; but be sure to get ready for the next battle.

Paul was going to Jerusalem. Along the way, he met with dear friends, ministered the Word, and even enjoyed a quiet voyage and a refreshing walk (v. 13). God's servants need to get away from people and have time alone to think, meditate, and pray. Paul knew he was facing danger in Jerusalem (vv. 22–23), and he wanted to be prepared spiritually.

In his farewell message to the elders, Paul reviewed his

past ministry (vv. 18–21), shared his present concerns (vv. 22–24), and revealed future dangers (vv. 28–31). If you want to catch the heart of Paul, consider his statements: "Serving the Lord . . . I kept back nothing . . . that I may finish my race with joy. . . . It is more blessed to give than to receive."

One day, life will end, and we will have to give our farewell speech. Can we look back without regret and look ahead without fear? Will we finish our race with joy even while others are weeping?

Paul's Roles

As Paul reviewed his ministry in Acts 20:24–26, he saw himself as an accountant *("I count"), a* runner *("I may finish my race"), a* steward *("the ministry which I received"), a* witness *("to testify"), a* herald *("preaching the kingdom"), and a* watchman *("innocent of the blood"). What a responsibility it is to be a servant of God!*

ACTS 21

The traveler (1–14). This farewell journey brought both joy and sorrow to Paul, but life is like that. He knew what lay ahead of him but kept going (Luke 9:51). Years before, the Lord had told him to get out of Jerusalem (22:18). Was he wrong in going back?

The peacemaker (15–25). Paul moved from "the will of the Lord be done" (v. 14) to "do what we tell you" (v. 23). So anxious was Paul to bring unity to the Jews and Gentiles in the church that he agreed to the plan. Was he following "wisdom from above" or "earthly wisdom" (James 3:13–18)? Not every decision we make turns out to bring peace.

The prisoner (26–40). The plan almost worked; on the last day, however, trouble started (v. 27). Of course, their charges

were absurd; yet the mob lives on "suppose" and not fact. Paul had been careful not to cause any unrest in the city (24:10–13), but his efforts had been in vain. He would spend the next five years as a prisoner of Rome.

Sometimes our plans and good intentions seem to bring only trouble. But God is still in control! He used Paul's trials to accomplish His purposes so that His servant got to Rome (23:11). He can do the same for His people today. Walk by faith!

ACTS 22

The *starting point* of Paul's defense was his identification with the Jews (vv. 1–16; 1 Cor. 9:19–23). His birth, training, and early ministry as a rabbi were strictly orthodox. He associated his conversion with Ananias, "a devout man according to the law" (v. 12). He was very tactful, but it takes tact to have contact.

The *turning point* of Paul's defense was his use of the word *Gentiles* (v. 17). Had he not used that word, Paul might have been set free; *but the whole burden of his life was to reach the Gentiles* (Eph. 3:1–13). Paul was arrested because of religious bigotry; his people did not realize that God was doing a new thing in the world.

The *finishing point* was the threat of a scourging, which Paul avoided by asserting his Roman citizenship (vv. 22–29). From then on, it would be one hearing after another and a delay of two years in Caesarea. But God was working out His will in His time, and Paul was willing to wait.

"God is the master of the scenes; we must not choose what part we shall act; it concerns us only to be careful that we do it well, always saying, 'If this please God, let it be as it is.'"

Jeremy Taylor

ACTS 23

Paul was in danger. If the Romans did not imprison him, the Jews would kill him (22:22). What means did God use to help Paul?

Integrity (1–5). Paul had nothing to hide, and his conscience was clear. Ananias was out of line when he had Paul slapped; but Paul showed respect for the office, not the man.

Strategy (6–10). This did not set Paul free, but it did divide the enemy camp and get the Romans to protect their prisoner better.

Advocacy (11). Paul had the best lawyer available! Christ had assured him when he was in Corinth (18:9–11), and He would assure him again (27:21–25; 2 Tim. 4:16–18). Paul knew that "if God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Opportunity (12–22). Paul's nephew lived in the city, and by the providence of God, he discovered the Jewish plot. Only the Lord could have worked that out. We never know what friend or relative God will use to help us.

Authority (23–35). Paul had the protection of 472 Roman soldiers, and the whole authority of the government was behind him. The Romans did not give Paul a fair hearing, but God still used them to protect Paul and get him to Rome.

ACTS 24

How do the unsaved go about opposing the Lord's servants and their work?

Tertullus started with *flattery* (vv. 2–4), knowing that many people in high places are susceptible to it (12:20–24). Flattery appeals to our pride. If we did not flatter ourselves, others could not successfully flatter us. We really *want* to believe what they say!

Then Tertullus used *slander* (vv. 5–8). Napoleon said, "He who knows how to flatter also knows how to slander." As his last weapon, the lawyer called on *false witnesses* (v. 9) who together supported Tertullus's lies about Paul.

Paul's defense was threefold: his life, his faith and his service to his nation. Although his enemies could not prove their accusations, Paul did not go free. *The safest place for Paul was in that prison,* for God had work for him to do in Rome.

You may not understand why God permits lies to triumph, but leave it all in His hands. He is in control, and the final judgment rests with Him.

Don't Delay

Actually, Felix was the prisoner, and Paul was the prosecutor. Felix knew he was guilty; but instead of accepting Christ, he delayed. The convenient time to be saved is now *(2 Cor. 6:1–2; see also Isa. 55:6–7).*

ACTS 25

Festus tried to use Paul as a political pawn to win favor with the Jews (vv. 3, 9). If he had succeeded and sent Paul to Jerusalem, the apostle would have been killed. Paul did the wise thing: he used his rights as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar. There are times when believers must use the law to protect themselves and the ministry.

But now Festus had a problem. How could he send Paul to Caesar when he had no charges against him that could be proved? God's people sometimes are treated like the guilty even though they are innocent. Remember Joseph, David, Daniel, and Jeremiah, not to mention our Lord Jesus Christ.

In all that happened, God was fulfilling His promise to Paul that he would witness before rulers (9:15) and finally get to Rome (23:11). Being a prisoner and enduring the hearings were difficult for Paul, but he used his opportunities wisely. He believed Jesus' words: "But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony" (Luke 21:13).

ACTS 26

Paul saw the light. Instead of defending himself, Paul used the opportunity to present the gospel to King Agrippa and others with him (1 Pet. 3:13–17). When Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he made some important and life-

changing discoveries: his religion was out-of-date; his zeal for God was only hurting God; Jesus was alive; and Jesus had a job for Paul to do. Talk about a rude awakening!

The Gentiles need the light. Paul's great learning and zeal would be devoted to the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles (vv. 17–18). Lost sinners are in spiritual darkness and only Christ can give them light.

Agrippa rejected the light. He tried to discredit the message by accusing Paul of being mad, and he tried to minimize his own conviction by his nonchalant reply (v. 28). He turned his back on the light; he was "almost" when he might have been "altogether."

"Almost persuaded to be a Christian is like the man who was almost pardoned, but he was hanged; like the man who was almost rescued, but he was burned in the house. A man that is almost saved is damned."

Charles Spurgeon

ACTS 27

Rejecting Paul's counsel (1–13). What did a Jewish tentmaker know about sailing a ship? So, the advice of the experts (v. 11) and the vote of the majority (v. 12) carried the day. When you are impatient (v. 7) and uncomfortable (v. 12), and when the golden opportunity seems to come along (v. 13), beware! A storm may be brewing!

Hearing Paul's encouragement (14–26). Paul was right to say, "I told you so!" But he followed it with a word of promise from the Lord and a word of encouragement from his believing heart. At a time like that, people needed promises, not preaching.

Following Paul's example (27–38). Paul publicly gave thanks and directed their hearts to God, which encouraged

everybody. The weary passengers needed strength for what lay ahead, and that meant taking time to eat. Paul was practical as well as perceptive.

Although Paul started the voyage as a prisoner and passenger, he ended it as the captain of the ship. The ship was lost; but by the grace of God, Paul's presence saved all the passengers. Can the Lord depend on you to sail by faith when you face the storms? Can others depend on you?

ACTS 28

Does anything in this chapter surprise you?

That the natives were kind (1–2, 7–10)? The natives may have been superstitious, but even unsaved people can show concern for those in need. The pagan sailors worked hard to save Jonah before they threw him into the sea (Jon. 1:11–16).

That Paul picked up sticks (3)? If you had saved 276 people from drowning, would you feel it necessary to do menial labor like picking up sticks? Certainly the grateful passengers would have relieved Paul of the task! But Paul was a servant, and he did the job that needed to be done (Phil. 2:1–11).

That Paul was bitten (3–6)? Had he not already been through enough suffering? When Satan cannot win as the lion (1 Pet. 5:8), then he comes as the serpent (2 Cor. 11:3). We must constantly be on guard and trust the Lord to care for us (Mark 16:18).

Paul's Last Years

Paul was a prisoner in Rome from 61 to 63, and during that time wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. From 63 to 65, he was free to minister, and he wrote 1 Timothy and Titus. Paul was imprisoned again in 66, wrote 2 Timothy, and was martyred at Rome in late 66 or early 67.

That Paul welcomed encouragement (11–16)? Even an apostle needs to be encouraged at times, and the saints who met Paul did just that. The group at Appii Forum traveled about ten miles farther than the other group. How far would you go to encourage a fellow believer?

That the Jewish leaders rejected the Word (17–31)? God's chosen people should have known the Scriptures; yet when it was time to decide, the group was divided. But Paul kept witnessing and let God bless the Word as He pleased.

ROMANS

Paul was on his third missionary journey when he wrote the epistle to the Romans, probably from Corinth. He had long planned to visit the believers in Rome, many of whom he knew (chap. 16), and this letter prepared the way. In the letter, he answers the false accusations made about him (3:8; 6:1) and explains why he had not visited Rome sooner (15:23–29). He also gives the grandest presentation of Christian doctrine found anywhere in Scripture.

Romans is one of three books written to explain Habakkuk 2:4: "The just shall live by his faith" (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). The basic theme is "the just," what it means to be justified (declared righteous by God) and to live a righteous life. *Righteousness* is used in one form or another over forty times.

The book easily falls into three parts: God's righteousness and salvation (chaps. 1—8), God's righteousness and Israel (chaps. 9—11), and God's righteousness and practical Christian living (chaps. 12—16). Romans 1:16–17 is a key statement.

Romans is a closely knit argument that defends the righteousness of God. You can summarize the argument by noting the verses containing "therefore" (3:20, 28; 5:1; 8:1; 12:1).

Justification is God's gracious act by which He *declares* the believing sinner righteous in Jesus Christ because of the work of Christ on the cross. When you believe, Christ's righteousness is *imputed,* that is, "put to your account." Sanctification is God's work in the believer whereby He *imparts* His righteousness and develops holy character and conduct. A righteous standing before God leads to a holy life before men. We are not saved by works or by faith plus works; we are saved by a faith that works (James 2:14–26).

ROMANS 1

The gospel of God (1–17). God has good news! It is *promised* in the Old Testament and centered in Jesus Christ. He came to earth a Jew, died, and arose again; and He saves all who will trust in Him. He alone *purchased* salvation, and this message must be *preached* to the whole world. Why? Because the gospel alone is "the *power* of God to salvation" (v. 16, italics added).

Paul was gripped by the gospel; his whole life was controlled by it. Called to be an apostle (v. 1), he felt himself a debtor to the whole world (v. 14). Through His church, God is calling people to Jesus Christ (vv. 5–7). Has the gospel gripped you?

"Religions are man's search for God; the Gospel is God's search for man. There are many religions, but one Gospel."

E. Stanley Jones

Spiritual Debts

God's people are free from the debt of sin, but they are debtors to witness to a lost world (Rom. 1:14), obey the Holy Spirit (8:13), love all people (13:8), encourage their weaker brothers and sisters (15:1), and help the people of Israel (15:25–27). Are you paying your spiritual debts?

The wrath of God (18–32). Paul's main theme is the righteousness of God, but he presents it against the dark background of the judgment of God, *which is going on right now.* Men know God from creation and conscience (vv. 19–20) but

refuse to honor Him as God. They live for the creature, not the Creator, and make themselves into gods (v. 25; Gen. 3:4–5). So, God gave them up (vv. 24, 26, 28) and let them suffer the consequences. *The greatest judgment God can inflict on us is to let us have our own way.*

But the same God who delivered up sinners to judgment *delivered up His own Son for lost sinners* (8:32)! That is the gospel. Do you believe it? Are you sharing it?

ROMANS 2

If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, your sins have already been judged on the cross (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1). But are you ready for the judgment seat of Christ where your works will be judged (Rom. 14:10–12; 2 Cor. 5:10)? Ask yourself the following questions.

Do I judge myself or others (1–3)? How easy it is to cover up my own failures by criticizing others (Matt. 7:1–5)!

Am I grateful for God's goodness (4)? It is not the badness of man but the goodness of God that brings us to repentance (Luke 15:17–19). Do I take God's many blessings for granted?

Is my faith proved by works (5–11)? Paul was not teaching salvation by works but works that prove salvation. Do I obey God's truth and persist in holy living? Do I have a hard heart or a tender heart?

Am I hiding behind religion (12–16, 25–29)? The Jews boasted of their law, but it could not save them. External rituals do not guarantee internal changes. God searches the heart. What does He see in my heart?

"How rarely we weigh our neighbor in the same balance in which we weigh ourselves."

Thomas a Kempis

Do I practice what I profess (17–24)? Do I tell others what is right but then do what is wrong? Do I expect more of others than I do of myself?

God judges honestly (v. 2) and without partiality (v. 11), and no secret is hidden from Him (v. 16). Are you prepared?

ROMANS 3

Paul, the attorney, summarizes his case.

All are condemned (1–19). Both Jews and Gentiles (religious and irreligious) are guilty before God, and one is no better than the other (v. 9). Paul quotes from Psalms and Isaiah to show that, from head to foot, we are all lost sinners. Do you want to argue about this? Then your mouth has not been stopped! God cannot save you until you say, "Guilty!" and shut your mouth.

We cannot save ourselves (20). The law is a mirror that reveals our sin; only the blood of Christ can wash away our sin. It is good to do good works, but good works are not good enough to save us (Eph. 2:8–9).

God's salvation is lawful (21–31). But how can a *holy* God forgive *guilty* people? Is that lawful? If our judges did that, society would fall apart. But God the Law Giver and Judge obeyed His own law, died for us, and paid the penalty for our sins. The Judge is now the Savior!

Have you shut your mouth, trusted Jesus Christ, and heard God say, "Not guilty"?

ROMANS 4

How was Abraham saved (1–4, 9–12)? Not by works, but by faith (Gen. 15:6). Salvation is not like wages that you earn or works that you can boast about. Abraham was not saved by keeping the law because the law had not been given, nor was he saved by obeying a religious ritual. It was all by God's grace!

How was David saved (5–8)? David wrote Psalm 32 after his great sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). Can God forgive a man who commits adultery, deceit, and murder? Yes! When David repented and turned to God, he was forgiven, even though the Lord allowed David to feel the bitter consequences of his sins (2 Sam. 12). God justifies *the ungodly,* not the righteous (v. 5; Matt. 9:9–13).

How can you be saved (13–25)? Simply by believing God's

promise as Abraham did. *Faith* and *promise* go together just as *law* and *works* go together. Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation physically, but he is the "father" of all believers spiritually (v. 16; Matt. 3:7–9). At Calvary, our sins were put on Christ's account; when you trust Christ, God puts Christ's righteousness on your account (2 Cor. 5:21). What can be more blessed than to know that your sins are forgiven?

Our Sins Are Covered

Because he preached salvation by grace alone, Paul was accused of promoting sin (Rom. 3:5–8), but the accusation was false. Persons who experience the grace of God in forgiveness have no desire to sin; and if they do sin, they confess it to the Lord (1 John 1:5—2:1). They are tempted (1 Cor. 10:13), and sometimes they fall; but they do not stay down (Ps. 37:23–24). Read all of Psalm 32 to see what God does for His own.

ROMANS 5

In chapter 4, Paul went back to Abraham and David to explain how God declares believing sinners righteous; now he goes all the way back to Adam. Adam's sin passed sin and death on to the whole human race, but Christ's obedience gives righteousness and life to all who trust Him. In our first birth, we became condemned children of Adam; but in our second birth, we are the forgiven children of God. Note the blessings of justification.

Riches (1–5). Peace, access into God's grace, joy, hope, love, the Holy Spirit—what riches we have in Christ! And trials work *for* us, not *against* us, and develop Christian character. How rich we are!

Reconciliation (6–11). We are at peace with God and need

not be afraid. If He did so much for us when we were enemies, think what He will do for us now that we are His children!

Reigning (12–21). When we belonged to the old creation under Adam, death and sin reigned; now that we are in Christ in the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), grace is reigning, *and we are reigning in life* (v. 17). You can live like a king by the grace of God!

ROMANS 6

Being a Christian is *a matter of life or death* (vv. 1–11). Persons who do not understand the grace of God argue, "If God is gracious, then we should sin more so we receive more grace." Those who trust Christ are identified with Him by the Spirit in His death, burial, and resurrection, as pictured in baptism. The old life is buried! We can reckon it dead (v. 11) and walk in newness of resurrection life.

Being a Christian is *a matter of bondage or freedom* (vv. 12–22). Who is your master, Jesus Christ or the old life? You are not under the authority of Moses (v. 15), but that does not mean you have freedom to break God's moral law (8:1–5). Yield yourself to the Lord; He is the most wonderful Master, and the "salary" He pays lasts forever.

"Alive to God"

The most vivid illustration of Romans 6 is Lazarus (John 11). Jesus raised him from the dead and then said, "Loose him, and let him go" (John 11:44). Lazarus left the grave, got rid of the graveclothes, and began a new life (Col. 3:1ff.). God's people are both "dead" and "alive" (v. 11) and by faith must live accordingly.

Being a Christian is *a matter of rewards or wages* (v. 23). We quote this verse as we witness to the lost, and rightly so; but Paul wrote it originally to believers. Although God forgives the sins of His children, He may not stop the painful conse-

quences of sin. The pleasures of sin are never compensated for by the wages of sin. Sinning is not worth it!

ROMANS 7

Believers are not under the law, but that does not give them license to become outlaws. They have a new life (6:1–11) and a new Master (6:12–23), and they also have a new love: they are *married to Christ* (vv. 1–6). If a marriage must be based on laws instead of love, it is going to make for an unhappy home.

If the law cannot change us or control us, what good is it? Its purpose is to reveal sin, and it does its job well (v. 7). Paul learned that the law even aroused evil desires in him (v. 8). If something as holy as God's law (v. 12) can arouse sinful desires, what wicked sinners we must be!

Law brings out the worst in us, but love brings out the best in us. The Holy Spirit within us helps us to do what God wants us to do (Rom. 8:1–5) and to be what God wants us to be (Gal. 5:22–23). Keep your love relationship with the Lord alive and exciting, and you will have righteousness instead of wretchedness.

A Yielded Life

Romans 7:21–25 does not suggest that you live a divided life because that is impossible. You must choose your Master (6:15–23) and be true to your Husband, Jesus Christ (7:1–6). "The mind" refers to the new nature from God and "the body of death" the old nature from Adam. We cannot serve God with an old nature that is sinful (7:18), but the Holy Spirit enables us to do His will as we yield to Him. The human body is not sinful, but human nature is.

ROMANS 8

Paul asked, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (7:24). This chapter gives the answer: the Holy Spirit of God. The blessings He brings make us "more than conquerors" (v. 37)!

Life (1–11). When God saved you, He gave you a new life, not a new law; as you yield to that life, you obey His law. Keep your mind centered on the things of the Lord (Col. 3:1–4) and seek to please God in all things. Let the Spirit live His life in you.

Liberty (12–17). We enter God's family by the new birth, not by adoption (John 3); but adoption gives us an adult standing in His family. He deals with us as mature sons and daughters and not as "little children." We can talk ("Abba, Father" [v. 15]), walk, and use our inheritance right now. We are free, but we are still debtors to the Lord (v. 12).

Hope (18–25). We are not frustrated by the suffering we experience or see in our world because we have hope. When Jesus returns, we will enter into glorious liberty! The Spirit is the beginning of the harvest and assures us that the best is yet to come.

"The Holy Spirit longs to reveal to you the deeper things of God. He longs to love through you. He longs to work through you. Through the blessed Holy Spirit you may have: strength for every duty, wisdom for every problem, comfort in every sorrow, joy in His overflowing service."

T. J. Bach

Guidance (26–30). God's purpose is to make His children like His Son, and He will succeed. The Spirit intercedes for us and guides us as we pray, and the circumstances of life work for our good, no matter how painful they may be.

Love (31–39). The Spirit of God makes the love of God real to us (5:5; John 14:23–27). The Father is for us (vv. 31–32), the Son is for us (v. 34), and the Spirit is for us (vv. 26–27). Nothing can separate us from His love. Is there any reason why we should not be "more than conquerors"?

God's People

In Romans 9—11, Paul's discussion of Israel is not an interruption but an illustration of his theme. He explains Israel's past election (chap. 9), present rejection (chap. 10), and future reception (chap. 11); and he proves that God has been righteous in all His dealings with Israel. God has not failed to work out His divine purposes for the Jews, nor will He fail to work out His purposes for His church.

ROMANS 9

In a part of the Bible that emphasizes the sovereignty of God, We see Paul sorrowing (9:1–3), praying (10:1), and worshiping (11:33–36). He did not feel that God's sovereignty in any way destroyed man's responsibility. The God who ordains the end (saving the lost) also ordains the means to the end, the prayers and witness of His people. They go together.

God is not obligated to save anybody, for all deserve to be condemned. Even Israel was chosen only because of His grace and love (Deut. 7:6–8). Therefore, nobody can criticize God or say He is unfair. That He is merciful to sinners should make us rejoice!

Israel's rejection of Christ did not ruin God's plan, for He went to the Gentiles (Acts 10:1ff.; 15:14) who gladly received the good news. However, God has a remnant among the Jews (vv. 27–29), and believing Jews and Gentiles are one in the church (Eph. 2:11–22).

His mercy endures forever!

God's Part and Our Part

Charles Spurgeon was asked how he reconciled divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and he replied, "I never try to reconcile friends." Augustine said that we must pray as though it all depended on God and work as though it all depended on us. That biblical balance makes for blessing.

ROMANS 10

Why did Israel stumble over Christ and reject Him? Because they did not understand the kind of righteousness God wanted or how to get it. Like the Pharisees (and many people today), they thought only of righteous *works* and could not comprehend a righteousness that comes by faith (v. 13; Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21).

The missionary heart of Paul comes out in verses 14–17. Salvation is by faith, and faith comes "by hearing . . . the word of God" (v. 17). But unbelieving sinners (including Israel) cannot hear unless we tell them. God needs people with beautiful feet (Isa. 52:7) to carry the gospel to the lost.

Despite Paul's broken heart (v. 1) and God's outstretched hands (v. 21; Isa. 65:2), Israel did not believe; but the Gentiles did believe and God saved them! When you feel discouraged in your witnessing, remember Paul; continue caring, praying, and sharing the good news. Keep those feet beautiful!

ROMANS 11

The theology of Romans 9—11 magnifies God's grace and extols His sovereignty. Never lose the wonder of your salvation or of the greatness of God. No matter how deep the valley or difficult the battle, a vision of God's greatness puts joy in your heart and strength in your soul. God knows what He is doing even if you do not understand it fully.

There is a future for Israel; Paul is proof of that (v. 1; 1 Tim. 1:16), and so is Israel's past history (vv. 2–10). God has always had a believing remnant in Israel, no matter how dark the day. When you become discouraged about the future of the church and feel that you may be the only faithful Christian left, read 1 Kings 19 and focus on God's greatness.

We cannot explain all the purposes and plans of God, but we can worship and praise Him for who He is (vv. 33–36). The end result of all Bible study is worship, and the end result of all worship is service to the God we love.

"Fate says the thing is and must be, so it is decreed. But the true doctrine is—God has appointed this and that, not because it must be, but because it is best that it should be. Fate is blind, but the destiny of Scripture is full of eyes. Fate is stern and adamantine, and has no tears for human sorrow. But the arrangements of providence are kind and good."

Charles Spurgeon

ROMANS 12

The biblical pattern is to relate doctrine and duty, for what you believe must determine how you behave. In these closing chapters, Paul discusses your relationship with the Lord (12:1–2), yourself (12:3), the church (12:4–16), your enemies (12:17–21), government (chap. 13), and believers who disagree (chaps. 14—15).

Transformation (vv. 1–2). The Spirit of God transforms your life by renewing your mind (2 Cor. 3:18), but He cannot do this unless you give Him your body. When you give yourself to God in spiritual worship, you become a living sacrifice to the glory of God.

Evaluation (3). To think more highly of yourself, *or less*

highly, is sin, so have a proper estimate of who you are and what God has given you (Gal. 6:3–5).

Cooperation (4–16). You are part of the body of Christ with a ministry to fulfill, so do your part lovingly and joyfully.

Vindication (17–21). If yours is a godly life, you are bound to have enemies (Matt. 5:10–12; 2 Tim. 3:12); but leave all judgment to the Lord. If you let the Lord have His way, He will use your enemies to build you and make you more like Christ.

ROMANS 13

Believers are citizens of heaven, but we must not minimize our responsibilities on earth. We must be exemplary citizens so that the Lord will be glorified (1 Pet. 2:11–17).

Law (1–7). God has established human government because people are sinners and must be controlled. Governmental authority comes from God, so you must respect the office even if you cannot respect the officer. The fear of punishment is not the highest motivation for obedience, but it is better than having chaos.

Love (8–10). Love for God and for your neighbor is the highest motive for obedience. Love does what is right and just and seeks the best for others. By nature, we do not have this kind of love (Titus 3:3); the Lord gives it to us (Rom. 5:5).

Light (vv. 11–14). Christian citizens live in the light of the Lord's return. Paul admonishes, "Wake up—dress up—clean up—look up!" Are you heeding it?

"Whatever makes men good Christians makes them good citizens."

Daniel Webster

ROMANS 14

Your love may be tested more by Christians who disagree with you than by unbelievers who persecute you. It takes a diamond to cut a diamond. What should you do when your

brother or sister disagrees with you about how God's people ought to live?

Acceptance (1–9). Not all believers are mature, and love demands that the mature members of the family defer to the immature. Love protects people and gives them a chance to grow up. People may be difficult, but we must accept them in love for the Lord's sake.

Accountability (10–12). We have no right to judge and condemn one another because the Judge is the Lord. Each believer will have enough to do in keeping his own account right without interfering with others' accounts!

Ambition (13–23). Our desire must not be to get everybody to agree with us; our desire must be to pursue peace, not cause others to stumble, and help others to mature in Christ. What starts as *grieving* (v. 15) can become *offending* (v. 21), *making weak* (v. 21), and *causing others to stumble and fall* (vv. 13, 21). The result might be *destroying* a brother's or sister's faith (vv. 15, 20). Is destroying another just to have your own way worth it?

Gaining Strength

The weak Christian does not yet understand and practice freedom in Jesus Christ. Jewish believers, raised under the law of Moses, had a difficult time adjusting to their new life. Conscience becomes strong as we accept what God says about us in the Word and act on it by faith. However, it takes time for conscience to develop, and we must be patient with one another.

ROMANS 15

A debt to the weak (1–6). The strong must bear the weak and help them grow, and that takes love and patience. If we

live to please ourselves, we will not follow the example of Christ who lived to please the Father and help others.

A debt to the lost (7–21). God saved the Jews so that they might reach the Gentiles and lead them in praising the Lord. God has saved us so that we might win others. We have a debt to pay (1:14).

A debt to Israel (22–33). The Gentiles are indebted to the Jews (John 4:22). And that debt is paid by praying for them (Ps. 122:6), witnessing to them in love, and sharing our material gifts to assist them.

"To consider persons and events and situations only in the light of their effect upon myself is to live on the doorstep of hell."

Thomas Merton

ROMANS 16

We are prone to honor Paul and forget the many ordinary people who helped make his ministry possible. Paul was the human author of the epistle to the Romans, but Tertius wrote it down (v. 22), Gaius gave Paul a place to live and work (v. 23), and Phoebe carried the completed letter to Rome. Nobody in God's family is unimportant to Him, and no ministry is insignificant. Find the work He wants you to do and faithfully do it.

There is a "hidden romance of history" that is not recorded in the Bible. When and how did Priscilla and Aquila risk their lives to save Paul (vv. 3–4)? When were Andronicus and Junia in prison with Paul (v. 7)? How was Rufus's mother a mother to Paul (v. 13)? Who were the troublemakers about whom Paul warned the Roman believers (vv. 17–18)? Perhaps one day in heaven we will be given the answers!

Meanwhile, the important thing is that we are obedient to the Lord (v. 19) and lead others into "obedience to the faith"

(v. 26). The God of patience and comfort (15:5), the God of hope (15:13), and the God of peace (16:20) will establish you and enable you (16:25).

"The service we render for others is really the rent we pay for our room on this earth."

Wilfred Grenfell

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Corinth, the capital of Achaia, was perhaps the richest and most important city in Greece. It was also the most corrupt. A center for trade, Corinth was invaded by all kinds of religions and philosophies. Paul founded the Corinthian church during his second missionary journey (Acts 18) and ministered there a year and a half.

After he left, serious problems developed in the church, and Paul wrote the members a stern letter that was not successful (1 Cor. 5:9). He heard that the church was divided (1:11), and then a delegation from the church arrived in Ephesus with a letter asking Paul's help regarding specific questions. First Corinthians was his response.

Paul dealt with sin in the church (chaps. 1—6), and then he answered the questions they asked (chaps. 7—16; note the repeated phrase, "Now concerning . . ."). He discussed marriage (chap. 7), idolatry (chaps. 8—10), public worship (chap. 11), spiritual gifts (chaps. 12—14), the Resurrection (chap. 15), and the special offering he was taking for the Jews (chap. 16).

Paul had planted a church in the city, but the city had gotten into the church; and that explained why there were so many problems. The believers in Corinth needed to heed Romans 12:2, and so do we today.

1 CORINTHIANS 1

Even though believers are "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), the local church often suffers from division. Why?

For one thing, we forget the calling we have in Christ (vv. 2, 9, 24–29). It is only by God's grace that we have been called, and this fact should humble us and encourage us to love one another (John 15:17).

Another factor is our tendency to follow human leaders and develop a fan club mentality. Christ died for us and lives to bless us, and He must have the preeminence.

A third factor is dependence on human wisdom and philosophies, of which there were many in Corinth. The world's wisdom had crept into the church, and it did not mix with the wisdom of God (Isa. 8:20). Various theologies are the attempts of scholars to interpret the Word of God, but they are not the Word. Never allow them to be a cause of division.

1 CORINTHIANS 2

Power (1–5). Paul did not imitate the itinerant teachers in Corinth who depended on their eloquence and intellectual brilliance. Paul's faith was in God, not in himself (Zech. 4:6). He wanted sinners to trust in Christ's power. You may think you lack ability to serve God, but God can turn your weakness into strength. The gospel still works (Rom. 1:16)!

Wisdom (6–16). The Jews asked for demonstrations of power and the Greeks looked for wisdom, both of which are available in Jesus Christ (1:24). A deeper wisdom of God is available for those who are mature (Heb. 5:12–14). Allow the Spirit of God to teach you about the Son of God from the Word of God, and grow up in Him.

Wisdom and power go together. They need each other, and they keep the Christian life balanced.

1 CORINTHIANS 3

Maturing (1–4). We never outgrow the nourishing milk of the Word (1 Pet. 2:2), but we cannot grow strong unless we also have the "solid food" (Heb. 5:12–14; Matt. 4:4). You grow by eating and exercising (1 Tim. 4:6–8), and it takes both. Age is no guarantee of spiritual maturity.

Harvesting (5–9). Everybody has a place in the Lord's harvest, and all are doing His work (John 4:34–38). There must be no competing or comparing, for the Lord alone recognizes the work and gives the reward. It makes no difference who the servant is so long as Jesus Christ is Lord of the harvest.

Building (10–17). Paul writes about the local church and the materials we put into it as we minister (Prov. 2:1–5; 3:13–

15). Substituting man's wisdom for God's Word means building with perishable materials that will burn up at the judgment seat of Christ.

Glorifying God (18–23). Because the Corinthian believers gloried in human teachers (1:12) and human wisdom, they robbed God of the glory that rightly belonged to Him. "Let no one boast in men" is a command, not a suggestion.

"If you lack knowledge, go to school. If you lack wisdom, get on your knees! Knowledge is not wisdom. Wisdom is the proper use of knowledge."

Vance Havner

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1 CORINTHIANS 4

Life is *a stewardship,* so be faithful (vv. 1–5). We judge ourselves, and others judge us; but the Final Judge is the Lord. Live to please Him alone.

Life is *a gift,* so be humble (vv. 6–9). Your abilities and blessings came from God; you cannot take credit for them. They are God's gift to you, and your use of them is your gift to God. It is sinful to contrast various Christian workers (1:12) because only God knows their hearts.

Life is *a battle,* so be courageous (vv. 9–13). If the apostles were the greatest Christians who ever lived, and they were filth and the scum of the earth, where did that leave the boasting Corinthians?

Life is *a school,* so be teachable (vv. 14–21). Paul saw himself as a father in the Lord who had to instruct and discipline his children. Our Father in heaven uses many hands and voices to teach us, and we must be willing pupils as we go through life.

1 CORINTHIANS 5

Separation (1–7). The background of the chapter is the Passover Feast (Exod. 12). The presence of the immoral man

should have turned the feast into a funeral (v. 2), but the church was boasting about the sinner instead of weeping over him. Tolerating known sin in the church is like putting leaven into the Passover Feast: it does not belong.

Celebration (8). Paul saw the Christian life as "keeping the feast" (v. 8), that is, feeding on Christ, being ready to move, and being sure we are not defiled by sin (leaven, yeast). The Lamb has set us free, and we are on our way to our promised inheritance!

Isolation (9–13). Sin in the life of the believer is far worse than sin in the life of an unbeliever. We cannot isolate ourselves from the world, but we can separate ourselves from disobedient believers so that God can discipline them.

Share in Fellowship

The phrase "deliver such a one to Satan" (1 Cor. 5:5) suggests that there is spiritual safety within the fellowship of the local church. To be disciplined and dismissed from fellowship makes us vulnerable to Satan's attacks. Far better to confess our sins, be forgiven, and be restored to fellowship.

1 CORINTHIANS 6

Not only were the Corinthian believers compromising with the world, but they were also losing their testimony before the world by taking each other to court before pagan judges. Paul repeatedly asked, "Do you not know?" (vv. 2, 3, 15, 16, 19). They were ignorant of some basic truths of the Christian life.

We will judge angels (1–8). If God entrusts that great a responsibility to His people, can't He help us with our petty decisions today?

We have been changed (9–12). We are not what we once were, so why should we live as we once lived? It is a matter not of "What is lawful?" but of "What is helpful?"

We belong to the Lord (13–20). He made the human body, He dwells in believers by His Spirit, and He purchased us at the Cross. The believer's body belongs to God and must be used to glorify Him.

Flee These Temptations

"Flee sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18) reminds us of Joseph when he fled from Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39). "Flee also youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22) is a parallel admonition. When it comes to the devil, resist him and he will flee from you (James 4:7); but when it comes to temptations of the flesh, you do the fleeing!

1 CORINTHIANS 7

Marriage is *a gift* (vv. 1–9), and not everybody has the same gift. Some people have more self-control than others. People remain unmarried for different reasons (Matt. 19:11–12), and each one must know the will of God.

Marriage is *a ministry* (vv. 10–16). He addressed people who had been converted after marriage and who wondered if they should remain with their unsaved spouses. "Yes," said Paul, "because you might win them to Christ." But even Christian spouses can have a wonderful ministry to each other as they grow in the Lord and love each other (Eph. 5:22ff.).

Marriage is *a calling* (vv. 17–24). When you become a Christian, that does not annul what you were before you trusted Christ. Jews are still Jews, slaves are still slaves, and married people are still married. But now, with the Lord's help, you can fulfill that calling in a greater way.

Marriage is *a challenge* (vv. 25–40). Paul does not deny the blessings of marriage, but he does remind us of the burdens that marriage brings, especially when the times are tough. Building a Christian home is a great ministry, but nobody should enter into it lightly or carelessly.

"Success in marriage involves much more than finding *the right mate. It also requires* being *the right mate."*

1 CORINTHIANS 8

Life is controlled by conscience. Conscience is the judge within that commends us for doing right and condemns us for doing wrong (Rom. 2:14–15). If we sin against conscience, we do terrible damage to the inner person.

Conscience is strengthened by knowledge. As we grow in spiritual understanding, a weak conscience becomes stronger, and we appreciate our freedom in Christ more and more. The weak believer must not run ahead of his conscience, and the strong believer must never force him to do so.

Knowledge must be balanced by love. Your spiritual knowledge can be either a weapon to hurt people or a tool to build people. If your knowledge puffs you up, it will tear others down. Love knows when and how to yield to others without compromising the truth. Review Romans 14—15.

"Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much; Wisdom is humble that he knows no more."

William Cowper

1 CORINTHIANS 9

We do not have the right to give up our freedom, for that was purchased by Christ (Gal. 5:1); *but we do have the freedom to give up our rights.* For the sake of winning the lost (v. 12), Paul gave up his right to receive financial support, and he begged the Corinthians to give up their rights for the sake of the saved.

Christian ministry is like fighting a war, caring for a vine-

yard, tending a flock, and cultivating a field (vv. 7–11). Meditate on these images, and see what they teach you about serving the Lord.

Ministry is a stewardship (v. 17), and the servant must be faithful (4:2). Ministers of Christ are also like runners who must keep the rules or be disqualified (vv. 24–27).

Verses 19–23 call for courtesy and wisdom in witness, not for compromise. "I have become all things to all men" does not mean Paul had no personal convictions. It means he used his convictions to build bridges, not walls. If he seemed inconsistent, it was only because people did not look deep enough. *His one great desire was to win the lost,* and that governed his every decision.

"Tact is the art of making a point without making an enemy."

Howard W. Newton

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1 CORINTHIANS 10

If you insist on using your rights, you may cause a weaker believer to stumble; *and you may also bring trouble on yourself.* When you face difficult decisions, take these factors into consideration.

God's blessing (1–5). The parallel to God's people today is obvious. We have been redeemed from the world, identified with Jesus Christ, and nourished by spiritual food and drink. But these blessings are no guarantee that we will be successful.

God's judgment (6–12). When Israel sinned, God disciplined them; and He will do the same to His people today. Do you practice and tolerate in your life any of the sins named here? God gives His children freedom, but the freedom to sin is not included.

God's promise (13–22). God knows how much we can take and always provides the way of escape. Sometimes the smart-

est thing to do is to flee (v. 14; 6:18). Always look for the open door and the blessing on the other side.

God's glory (23–33). Two extremes must be avoided: practicing license in the name of Christian freedom, and being so fussy that we cannot live in a real world and make rational decisions. When you seek to edify others and glorify the Lord, you will know what to do.

"When you flee from temptation, be sure you do not leave a forwarding address behind."

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1 CORINTHIANS 11

Some matters discussed in this chapter may have only local significance, but the spiritual principles apply to us today. When it comes to sharing in public worship, we must ask ourselves serious questions.

Do I dishonor authority (1–16)? We must be careful not to dishonor the Lord, no matter what the cultural standards may be. God has established headship in creation and in the church, and we must respect it.

Do I despise the church (17–22)? We are one in Christ and in love must honor one another. By the way they ate their love feast, the rich embarrassed the poor and brought shame to the church.

Do I discern the body (23–34)? When we meet to celebrate the Communion service, we must examine ourselves and not one another; and we must be honest with the Lord as we confess our sins. We discern His body in the bread, but we also discern it in the members of the church who eat with us. The Lord's Supper is a family feast. While it must be personal, it must not become so individual that it becomes selfish. It should be a means of promoting the unity of the church.

1 CORINTHIANS 12

The Corinthian believers were especially gifted by God (1:4–7), but some of them were creating problems by using

their spiritual gifts in unspiritual ways. Paul reminded those people of three basic truths.

There is one Lord (1–11). The Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14), not Himself. The Spirit gives us gifts so that we can serve Christ and His church "for the profit of all" (v. 7) and not for our own selfish enjoyment. Have you discovered what the Spirit has given you? Have you thanked God for it, and are you using your gift(s) under Christ's lordship?

There is one body (12–31). As members of the same body, we belong to one another, and we need one another. The believers you think you can do without may be the ones you need the most! We must minister to one another and care for one another as one body.

There is one danger (25). When a part of your physical body declares independence from the other parts, it starts to die and you have to visit the doctor. Division in the local church brings weakness and pain (1:10–17) because no Christian can go it alone and be successful. Do you thank God for fellow Christians and seek to care for them?

"None understand better the nature of real distinction than those who have entered into unity."

Johannes Tauler

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1 CORINTHIANS 13

This so-called hymn to love was Paul's prescription for solving the sickness in the church body in Corinth. The believers had spiritual gifts, but they lacked spiritual graces and needed to be reminded why love is so important in the Christian life.

Love puts *quality into service* (vv. 1–3). When you have love, your words and actions amount to something and help other people.

Love also puts *maturity into character* (vv. 4–7). The Corinthians were impatient with each other, suing each other, toler-

ating sin in the church, and creating problems because they did not have love. Whatever qualities you may have, they are nothing without love.

Love puts *eternity into life* (vv. 8–13). Love lasts, and what love does will last. Love is the greatest and does the greatest because "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

"God hates the great things in which love is not the motive power; but He delights in the little things that are prompted by a feeling of love."

D. L. Moody

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1 CORINTHIANS 14

Why go to church? God's people assemble for one purpose: to worship God. They worship Him by their praying and singing (v. 15), teaching and preaching (v. 3). Worship should result in glory to God, blessing for God's people (v. 3), and fear and conviction for sinners (vv. 23–25).

But for these things to happen, Jesus Christ must be Lord of our lives, and we must yield to the Holy Spirit. If we come to church to display our spirituality, we will not only miss the blessing ourselves but also cause others to miss the blessing. We come to honor Him.

A key word in this chapter is *edification* (vv. 3–5, 12, 17, 26), which means "building up." A worship service should lift up the Lord and build up the saints, not puff up the participants.

1 CORINTHIANS 15

We have a living Lord (1–19). Jesus is alive, and the gospel message is true! Witnesses who saw Him have passed along their testimony to us. When you trust Him, you receive resurrection life, eternal life (John 5:24); death can hold you no more.

We have a living hope (20–49). Jesus Christ will come

again, and the dead in Christ will be raised. We will have glorified bodies like Christ's body (1 John 3:1–3). Keep in mind that resurrection is not reconstruction. God does not reassemble the original body that has turned to dust. Like flowers and fruit from the planted seed, the glorified body is related to the "planted" body but different from it.

We have a living dynamic (50–58). We have no reason to give up because Jesus has conquered sin and death! If you really believe in the resurrection and return of Jesus, verse 58 will characterize your life. The best is yet to come, so let us give Him our best now.

"In God's world, for those who are in earnest, there is no failure. No work truly done, no word earnestly spoken, no sacrifice freely made, was ever made in vain."

F. W. Robertson

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1 CORINTHIANS 16

Love for the needy (1–4). These instructions concern the offering Paul was taking up from the churches to help the needy believers in Judea (Rom. 15:25–27). The principles involved may be applied to Christian giving in general: our giving should be voluntary, in proportion to God's blessing, systematic, and handled honestly.

Love for leaders (5–12). We have the privilege of encouraging God's work as we pray for His servants. Even men like Paul, Timothy, and Apollos needed the help and encouragement of God's people. Are you praying for leaders?

Love for the church (13–18). Love, steadfastness, and submission make for a strong church. When you have people who are devoted to the work of the Lord, people who refresh you in the Lord, God is going to bless. What a joy to be a part of a church family that ministers in love!

Love for Christ (19–24). "O Lord, come!" is a prayer that re-

veals Paul's daily anticipation of the return of the Lord. When he made his plans (vv. 5–8), he included the blessed hope. Do you love Him and love His appearing (2 Tim. 4:8)?

How Do You Pray?

"O Lord, come!" (1 Cor. 16:22) is in Aramaic marana tha, *often seen as* maranatha. *In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10); and the apostle John prayed, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20). We should long for His coming, not just because we want to escape the trials of life but because we love Him and want to see Him face-to-face.*

SECOND CORINTHIANS

The problems in the Corinthian church grew worse, and Paul had to make a painful visit to Corinth to confront the people causing the trouble (2 Cor. 2:1ff.). He then wrote a severe letter and sent it with Titus (2 Cor. 2:4–9; 7:8–12). After some delays, he and Titus finally met; and in response to the good news Titus brought from Corinth, Paul wrote this letter.

First, Paul described his ministry and explained why he had changed his plans (chaps. 1—7). It was a plea for *reconciliation*. Then he detailed the plans for taking up the love offering for the church in Judea (chaps. 8—9). It was a plea for *cooperation*. Because a group in the church questioned his authority, Paul concluded his letter defending his apostleship (chaps. 10—13). It was a plea for *appreciation* and obedience to the Word.

One key word in 2 Corinthians is *comfort* (encouragement), used in one form or another twenty-nine times. Yet there are many references to suffering, too. In this very personal letter Paul opens his heart and shares his deepest joys and sorrows. After all, Christians are human and must be honest in expressing their feelings.

2 CORINTHIANS 1

Christians need comfort. While trying to help the church, Paul experienced suffering so intense that he was almost ready to give up (vv. 8–9). God does not shelter His people from trials, not even gifted apostles who are doing His will. "Be kind," said John Watson, "for everyone you meet is fighting a battle."

Christians receive comfort. Your God is the "God of all comfort" (v. 3), and He will give you the grace you need when

you need it. Sufferings are not accidents; they are divine appointments, and your Father is in complete control. You will find comfort in praying, in claiming the promises of the Word (vv. 18–20), and in having deeper fellowship with the Lord.

Christians share comfort. God's comfort is not *given;* it is *loaned,* and you are expected to pass it on to others. The pain you experience now will help you encourage others in their trials. When you suffer, avoid self-pity, for self-pity will make you a reservoir instead of a channel. If you fail to share God's comfort with others, your experience in the furnace will be wasted; and it is a tragic thing to waste your sufferings.

Blessed Be the Lord

What do 2 Corinthians 1:3, Ephesians 1:3, and 1 Peter 1:3 have in common? All three are doxologies, praising the Lord for what He does for His people. They deal with past, present, and future blessings in the Christian life. In your sufferings, take time to praise the Lord. It is good medicine for a hurting heart.

"God does not comfort us to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters."

John Henry Jowett

2 CORINTHIANS 2

Feelings (1–5). From a heart of love touched with pain, Paul wrote a severe letter to the church, hoping to correct the problem. It brought grief to his dear friends, and that brought grief to Paul; but they disciplined the man who had caused the trouble. Paul was not afraid to share his feelings with others.

When you are out of touch with your feelings, you are out of touch with reality.

Forgiveness (6–11). When sinners truly repent, we should forgive them and reaffirm our love to them. Otherwise, they might become discouraged and give Satan an opportunity to accuse and attack (Rev. 12:10). Love does not condone sin, but it does cover sin when God has washed it away (James 5:20).

Fragrance (12–17). Paul described a Roman Triumph, the official parade given to a victorious general when he returned to Rome. The incense carried by the priests meant life to the Roman soldiers but death to the prisoners who would end up in the arena with the wild beasts. Christ has conquered, and we are privileged to march in His triumphal procession!

2 CORINTHIANS 3

The legalists who caused trouble in both Antioch and Jerusalem (Acts 15) had come to Corinth and enticed some of the believers into living by the law of Moses. Paul refuted their position by showing the wonders of the new covenant ministry. The background is Exodus 34:29–35.

It changes hearts (1–3). The law only reveals sin; it cannot renew the inner person. The Spirit wants to write a new version of His Word on your heart. Will you let Him?

It gives life (4–6). The law kills, but grace gives life and sustains that life. God's children have a living relationship with Him through the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2).

It gets more and more glorious (7–16). The glory of the law is gone: the temple, the priesthood, the ceremonies, and the awesome revelations of God's power. But the glory of God's grace remains and grows more glorious (v. 18; Prov. 4:18).

It brings freedom (17–18). The law brings bondage (Acts 15:10), but grace gives glorious freedom that makes us more and more like Jesus Christ. Each day, you can have your own personal transfiguration as you worship the Lord and yield to the Spirit.

2 CORINTHIANS 4

The glory of salvation (1–6). Unlike the legalists who had invaded the church, Paul had nothing to hide. The Jewish reli-

gious system veiled the gospel, but Paul sought to reveal the gospel. The image is taken from Genesis 1:1–3 and transferred from the old creation to the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

The glory of service (7–12). Paul paid a price for his ministry, but the legalists went about collecting honors (3:1). We are vessels; the treasure of the gospel life within is important. As vessels, we must be clean and available for His use (2 Tim. 2:20–21).

The glory of suffering (13–18). Jesus suffered and turned that suffering into glory; by faith, we can do the same thing. It is not wrong to care for the outward person, so long as you recognize that it is perishing. Concentrate on the inner person. It is the invisible that is imperishable. The best is yet to come!

"Lord, Thou knowest better than I know that I am growing older. Keep me from getting too talkative and thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally it is possible that I may be mistaken. Make me thoughtful, but not moody; helpful, but not bossy; Thou knowest, Lord, that what I want is a few friends at the end."

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2 CORINTHIANS 5

We know (1). This building is our new body that we will receive when we see the Lord (Phil. 3:20–21) because God saves the whole person (1 Cor. 15:42–58).

We groan (2–4). Creation is groaning and God's people also groan (Rom. 8:18–23), yearning for the Lord Jesus to come again. We do not want to die and leave our "houses"; we want

these bodies to be "clothed with" the glory of God from heaven (1 John 3:1–2). Paul longed to see Jesus come in his lifetime.

We are confident (5–8). God's Word gives us the truth about death and beyond, and God's Spirit guarantees that God's children will go to heaven. We claim this by faith and walk with confidence, and what peace it gives!

We aim to please Him (9–21). Paul's spiritual motivations for service include the judgment seat of Christ (vv. 9–11), the love of Christ (vv. 12–16), the power of the gospel (v. 17), and the commission of the Lord (vv. 18–21). What motivates you to do His will?

2 CORINTHIANS 6

Acceptance (1–2). Often those in the church who cause problems are people who have never truly been born again. They may think they are saved, but they are not. *Now* is the time to accept God's grace. Tomorrow may be too late.

Appreciation (3–13). It is easy to forget the sacrifices others have made so we can know the Lord. Paul never spoke about his sufferings unless his words helped to protect the ministry (11:16ff.). Do you take your church fellowship for granted? Have you thanked those who came before you and made it possible?

Agreement (14–18). Believers in the church were compromising with the world and not walking in a separated way (Ps. 1:1). God longs to have a closer fellowship with us, but He will not share the yoke with the world.

2 CORINTHIANS 7

Cleansing (1). It is one thing to ask God to cleanse you (Ps. 51:2, 7) and quite something else to cleanse yourself and put away the things that defile (Isa. 1:16). Separation sometimes demands surgery.

Comforting (2–7). The same people who give you joy can also cause you sorrow. When Titus reported that the church had disciplined the offender, the apostle was overjoyed. Have you ever been an answer to somebody's prayers as Titus was?

Clearing (8–11). If we are serious about repentance, we will do everything we can to clear things up. Remorse and regret

do not go far enough; there must be repentance followed by restitution.

Caring (12–16). Both Paul and Titus cared about the believers in Corinth, and this love finally won the day. You take a risk when you love others, for they may hurt you; but it is worth the risk to be like Jesus Christ and live a life of love.

True Repentance

Regret *involves the mind primarily, and* remorse *involves the emotions. But* repentance *includes a change of mind, a hatred for sin, and a willingness to make things right. If the will is not touched, conviction has not gone deep enough.*

2 CORINTHIANS 8—9

Chapters 8—9 focus on the offering Paul was taking for the needy believers in Judea. The Corinthian church had agreed to share in the collection but had been remiss in doing so. Paul reminded them of their promise and at the same time explained some principles of Christian giving.

It begins with surrender to the Lord (8:1–7). You cannot give your substance until you first give yourself (v. 5; Rom. 12:1–2). When you belong to the Lord, you start looking for opportunities to give instead of excuses not to give.

It is motivated by grace (8:8–9). Jesus was rich in heaven but became poor on earth (even to death on a cross!) that we might share His eternal riches. It was all by grace because *giving is a grace*. Law *commands*, but grace *consents* and does so joyfully.

It requires faith (8:10–15). The example of the manna (Exod. 16) shows that God always provides what we need. Paul also used the image of sowing to encourage generous giving (9:6). God's promises can be trusted.

It also requires faithfulness (8:16–24). Those who handle the Lord's money should be dedicated and faithful, making certain that everything is honest and honorable.

It is a testimony to others (9:1–5). A year before, the zeal of the Corinthians had stirred others to give; now Paul had to stir up the Corinthians! We must not give to be praised by people (Matt. 6:1–4), but we must also be good examples before others. If we make promises, we should keep them.

It must be done gladly (9:6–15). If you want spiritual enrichment from your giving (9:11), you must practice enjoyment and be glad for opportunities to give. Look at God's promises to faithful givers! How can you lose?

"For the Macedonian Christians, giving was not a chore but a challenge, not a burden but a blessing. Giving was not something to be avoided but a privilege to be desired."

George Sweeting

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2 CORINTHIANS 10

Satan seeks to blind minds to God's light (4:3–6), fortify minds against God's truth (vv. 1–6), and seduce minds from God's love (11:1–4). Paul gives some practical counsel for victory in spiritual warfare.

Be Christlike (1). Boldness must be balanced with meekness, for God's power is experienced in humility. Satan is our enemy, not people held by his power.

Use spiritual weapons (2–6). Paul may have had in mind Joshua's victory at Jericho (Josh. 6) when the walls came down because of Israel's faith. Read Ephesians 6:1–20, and be sure you are wearing the whole armor.

Keep your eyes on the Lord (7–11). That the Corinthians accused Paul of inconsistency gave Satan opportunity to work in their lives.

Accept the sphere of service God gives you (12–16). Every Christian soldier has a place to fill; if we are all following His orders, the church will win the battle.

Seek God's glory alone (17–18). How can we boast in victories that God alone can give? Paul quoted Jeremiah 9:24 to remind us where the glory belongs.

2 CORINTHIANS 11

Paul compares himself to a father with obligations to his spiritual children.

Protection (1–4). Spiritual leaders must protect the church from false teachers who are like suitors trying to seduce the church from devotion to Christ. Beware losing your love for Christ and for those who helped you trust the Savior.

Provision (5–15). Paul had the right to receive financial support at Corinth, but he laid it aside and sacrificed for them in love. They did not appreciate it! But do you appreciate the sacrifices others make for you? Are you willing to sacrifice for others even when they do not thank you?

Suffering (16–33). Paul mentioned his sufferings only to defend the gospel and the authority of his ministry. The false teachers bragged about their triumphs, but Paul boasted about his trials.

"The principle of sacrifice is that we choose to do or to suffer what apart from our love we should not choose to do or to suffer. When love is returned, this sacrifice is the most joyful thing in the world, and heaven is the life of joyful sacrifice. But in a selfish world it must be painful, and the pain is the source of triumph."

William Temple

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2 CORINTHIANS 12

Permission. Just as God permitted Satan to test Job (Job 1–2) and Peter (Luke 22:31–34), so He permitted Satan to attack Paul. God wanted to keep Paul humble after his exciting

visit to heaven. In the loving will of God, suffering has a purpose that can be fulfilled in no other way. Accept it, and it will become a heavenly blessing; fight it, and it will become a heavy burden.

Prayer. Like our Lord in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:44), Paul prayed three times for God to deliver him; but the Lord did not answer that prayer as Paul wanted. However, *God did meet the need* and gave His servant the grace he required. Paul did not simply make the best of it—he made the *most* of it! Grace can do that for you.

Perplexity. Paul was concerned more about the sins of the saints than about his own physical problems. Like a loving father, he wanted to go to Corinth and enjoy his dear children, but they were forcing him to discipline them. Yet, even discipline is an evidence of love (Heb. 12).

"We must form our estimate of men less from their achievements and failures and more from their sufferings."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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2 CORINTHIANS 13

As Paul planned his trip to Corinth, he envisioned the different kinds of people he would meet there.

The disobedient (1–4). Why would God's people want to disobey Him (12:20) and create problems for Paul and grief for the Lord, not to speak of problems for their church? Disobedient children must be dealt with, and Paul intended to be a faithful and loving father.

The disqualified (5–10). Some church members have never been born again, and that is why they create problems. Paul urges us to examine our hearts to be sure we are in the faith.

The devoted (11–14). These are the true brothers and sisters in the Lord, the set-apart ones (saints), the people who love one

another and promote the peace and purity of the church. They are the mature ones in the fellowship who encourage spiritual growth.

To which group do you belong?

Solutions

Every local church problem can be solved by being humble and honest and by drawing on the spiritual resources listed in 2 Corinthians 13:14. Do you avail yourself of these riches? Are you a part of the problem or a part of the answer?

GALATIANS

The churches Paul founded in the Roman province of Galatia (Acts 13—14) were invaded by false teachers like those Paul had refuted in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). We call these people "Judaizers" because they tried to bring Christians into bondage to the law of Moses.

Paul wrote this letter to magnify God's grace in salvation and to explain the freedom of God's people because of that grace (Gal. 5:1). It opens with a *personal affirmation* (chaps. 1—2) as Paul explains how God delivered him from bondage through faith in Jesus Christ. He then gives a *doctrinal explanation* and shows the relationship between law and grace (chaps. 3—4). He closes with a *practical application* that tells you how to enjoy grace and freedom in your daily life (chaps. 5—6).

Christian freedom is the liberty to become all that you can in Jesus Christ; it is not the license to do whatever you please. The worst bondage you can experience is living for yourself and yielding to the desires of the old nature (Rom. 6). "We have freedom to do good or evil," wrote St. Francis de Sales, "yet to make choice of evil, is not to use, but to abuse our freedom." Christ did not free us to be our own; He freed us to be His and His alone.

GALATIANS 1

To Paul, the gospel was much more than a message he preached: it was a miracle he had experienced (vv. 1–5). The gospel is "the power of God to salvation" (Rom. 1:16) and it brings freedom. Christ died "that He might deliver us" (v. 4). When Paul trusted Christ, he became a free man. The shackles of sin and legalistic religion were broken!

But the gospel was also a treasure that Paul guarded (vv. 6–17). Paul did not invent the gospel or learn it from others; God gave it to him (1 Cor. 15:1–11). *There is no other gospel.* To add to this message, take from it, or substitute another message is to destroy it. No wonder Paul attacked those who attacked the gospel; when you lose the gospel, you lose everything.

The gospel is a tie that binds God's people together (vv. 18–24). Saul the enemy became Paul the brother, and he was able to fellowship with people he once had persecuted. Christians may disagree on minor matters of interpretation and organization, but they agree on the message of the gospel.

"The gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement."

Paul S. Rees

GALATIANS 2

The runner (1–5). Paul saw himself as a man running a race, and he was sure he was on the right track and headed for the right goal. The Judaizers were trying to move the church into bondage and get them on a detour (5:7; Acts 15).

The steward (6–10). God has committed the gospel to His people, and we must guard it and share it with others. God is not looking for popular celebrities; He is looking for faithful stewards (1 Cor. 4:1–2).

The watchman (11–13). Paul was not afraid to confront the apostle Peter when Peter moved away from the truth of the gospel. "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty!" said Wendell Phillips, and that applies to our spiritual liberty as well.

The destroyer (14–21). Jesus destroyed the law by fulfilling it (Matt. 5:17–20). His death tore the temple veil (Luke 23:44–45) and removed the wall between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14–18). To go back to Moses is to rebuild what Jesus tore down and say that He did not really save us when we trusted Him.

"Whitefield and Wesley might preach the gospel better than I do, but they cannot preach a better gospel."

Charles Spurgeon

GALATIANS 3

Examination (1–14). It does us good to examine ourselves to make sure our spiritual experience is valid (2 Cor. 13:5). Do you have the Spirit living within? (See Rom. 8:9.) If you began in the Spirit (which is the only way to begin), are you trying to continue in the power of the flesh? Like Abraham, were you saved by faith; and are you now, like Abraham, walking by faith?

Explanation (15–25). The Judaizers wanted the Galatians to go back to Moses, but that was not far enough. *We must go back to Abraham where the promise started.* The law did not annul the promise; the law was given to reveal sin and prepare the way for Christ to come and fulfill the promise. The law is a tutor, not a savior; a mirror, not a cleanser.

Exhortation (26–29). Beware! A false gospel robs you of salvation and of membership in the family of God where all believers are one in Christ. It robs you of your spiritual riches as an heir of the promise. Are you rejoicing in the freedom you have in Christ?

GALATIANS 4

Are you a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ? Then you are also an heir, and all of Christ's riches are yours (Eph. 1:3)! A child must wait until maturity to inherit the family wealth, but God's children can have His wealth now (Phil. 4:19).

Are you a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ? Then you are free! A child is in bondage and must be guarded by adults, but a grown son or daughter enjoys freedom. To live under Law is to be a slave, and God wants His children to enjoy their freedom in Christ.

Are you a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ? Then you can become like Him as you yield to the Spirit (v. 19; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Are you a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ? Then your citizenship is secure in heaven because you are a child of promise (vv. 21–31; Gen. 16). You were born free!

Freedom in Christ

An allegory is a narrative in which people and events teach deeper lessons. John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress *is a classic example. Paul used Genesis 16 to illustrate your freedom in Christ. Hagar is the law, while Sarah stands for God's grace. Ishmael was born after the flesh (your first birth), while Isaac was born by the power of God (the new birth). Abraham represents faith, so Isaac was born "by grace [Sarah] . . . through faith [Abraham]" (Eph. 2:8). The Judaizers wanted to bring Hagar back again, but she was sent away because law and grace cannot coexist. Like Hagar, the law was a servant that had a temporary ministry. Once the Son arrived, that ministry was fulfilled.*

GALATIANS 5

Are you standing free (1)? Your freedom in Christ is a costly thing, for it cost Jesus His life. In Him, you stand free; the yoke of the law has been removed (Acts 15:6–11).

Are you falling (4)? To fall from grace does not mean to lose one's salvation. It means to move out of the sphere of grace into the sphere of law. It means to substitute regulations for a personal relationship with the Lord.

Are you running on course (7)? Or has false teaching gotten you on a detour?

Are you being leavened (9)? Jesus used leaven to picture sin (Matt. 16:6–12). Like yeast, false teaching is introduced quietly, it grows secretly, and soon it affects every part of your life.

Are you serving others (13)? Freedom brings with it the responsibility to serve. Love motivates us to fulfill the law of God (Rom. 13:8–14).

Are you walking in the Spirit (16)? Life, not law, changes behavior; and as you yield to the Spirit, Christ's life is manifest in the fruit of the Spirit.

Law works by compulsion from without, but grace works by compassion from within.

"Every time we say, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit,' we mean that we believe there is a living God able and willing to enter human personality and change it."

J. B. Phillips

GALATIANS 6

See others humbly (1–2). Your response to another's fall reveals your own walk, whether it is spiritual or not. Pride will make it impossible for you to help the fallen, but humility will bring blessing to you and to them.

See yourself honestly (3–5). Do you use somebody's fall to make yourself look better? Or do you know yourself, accept yourself, and seek to please God alone?

See your leaders appreciatively (6–10). When you give to others whose ministry blesses you, you are sowing seed that will bear fruit. When you use your resources for sinful purposes, you sow to the flesh and will reap a sad harvest.

See the Cross clearly (11–18). The false teachers wanted the world's praise, so they avoided the Cross; but the true believer

will glory in the Cross, even if it means suffering the world's enmity.

Faithfully Restore Them

The word translated "restore" in Galatians 6:1 also means "to set a broken bone." How gentle and loving we must be when we seek to help fallen brothers or sisters, for what we do will affect them and the body of Christ.

EPHESIANS

On his second missionary journey, Paul visited Ephesus and left Aquila and Priscilla there (Acts 18:19–21). He returned to Ephesus two years later and ministered for three years, reaching the whole province of Asia with the gospel (Acts 19). Some years later when Paul was a prisoner in Rome (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), he wrote this letter to the believers in Ephesus.

One major theme of Ephesians is that God is at work in this world, through His church, putting things together (1:10). In the first three chapters, Paul explains this as a work of redemption (chap. 1), resurrection (2:1–10), and reconciliation (2:11—3:21). In chapters 4—6, Paul states the responsibilities of believers in the light of God's great purpose. Note the emphasis on the word *walk*.

Ephesus was an important city and boasted of being custodian of the temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The city was devoted to idolatry, which explains why Paul had so much to say about defeating the devil (6:10ff.).

The Ephesian letter shows the balance in the Christian life between doctrine (chaps. 1—3) and duty (chaps. 4—6), divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We do not obey God so that He will give us His grace; we obey Him in response to grace already given.

EPHESIANS 1

Salvation is of God. Man does not save himself, for "salvation is of the LORD" (Jon. 2:9). You receive spiritual blessings from the Father (vv. 1–6), the Son (vv. 7–12), and the Spirit (vv. 13–14); and in Jesus Christ, you have all you need for life and service.

Salvation is all of grace. Paul emphasizes this point throughout the letter, especially in 2:1–10. Grace is God's favor bestowed on people who do not and cannot deserve it.

Salvation is for God's glory. God saves sinners not to solve their problems but to bring glory to Himself (vv. 6, 12, 14; 3:21). The church will glorify Him for all eternity!

Salvation reveals God's greatness (15–23). Ask God to open your spiritual eyes to see the greatness of His power. Jesus is alive and has conquered every enemy! You may draw on His power to meet every need in life.

Praying in His Will

The two prayers in Ephesians complement each other. Ephesians 1:15–23 focuses on knowing what God has done for you in Christ, while 3:14–21 emphasizes experiencing His blessings. The first is for enlightenment; *the second is for* enablement. *For other prison prayers of Paul, see Philippians 1:9–11 and Colossians 1:9–12. You may use these prayers for yourself and know that you are praying in the will of God.*

EPHESIANS 2

From death to life. Lost sinners are not simply sick people needing help; they are dead people needing life. The Son of God died that we might receive life through faith in Him (John 5:24).

From bondage to freedom. Lost sinners are in bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil (vv. 1–3) and cannot free themselves. In Christ, you have true freedom (John 12:31–32; Gal. 1:4; 5:24). Now God is working in you and through you to accomplish His great purposes (v. 10).

From the tomb to the throne. God did not give you life and leave you in the cemetery. He lifted you up to sit on the throne with His victorious Son!

From separation to reconciliation. In Jesus Christ, believing Jews and Gentiles are now one; the barriers have been removed. Believers are members of one body, citizens of one holy nation, and living stones in one temple (1 Pet. 2:1–10).

All of this is of God, His marvelous love (v. 4), and His grace and kindness (v. 7). No wonder Paul opened this letter with a doxology (1:3)!

EPHESIANS 3

A purpose. "For this reason" (vv. 1, 14) refers to what Paul wrote at the end of chapter 2, the building of the church. That was the purpose behind his praying and his ministering. Jesus said, "I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18), but He uses people to help get the job done. Is the building of the church your motivation to pray and serve?

A parenthesis. The word *Gentiles* (v. 1) put Paul in prison (Acts 22:21). God gave him a special commission to evangelize the Gentiles and to explain to both Jews and Gentiles God's "mystery" (sacred secret): in Christ, believing Jews and Gentiles are one and share the same spiritual riches. As He builds His church in this world, God is putting things together. Are you helping Him?

A prayer. This prayer is for spiritual vision, to see and lay hold of the greatness of God's love and power. God wants you to be concerned about "the whole building" (2:21), "the whole family" (3:15), "the whole body" (4:16), and "all the saints" (v. 18). Is narrowness in your life leading to shallowness and weakness?

EPHESIANS 4

To "give place to the devil" (v. 27) is to allow unconfessed sin in your life that gives Satan an opportunity to take over. Some sins to avoid are discussed here.

Disunity (1–13). Believers are "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), but we must endeavor to make that spiritual unity a

practical reality in our daily lives. Satan uses people who like to have their own way.

Immaturity (14–16). Spiritual birth must lead to spiritual growth as we become more like Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:22—2:3). If we are maturing in Christ, we will show it by being able to speak the truth in love. Satan is a liar and a murderer (John 8:44) and has a difficult time being successful when believers practice truth and love.

Impurity (17–32). You have been set free from the old life, so why live in those old sins anymore? Anything evil from the old life that is brought into the new life will give the devil a beachhead. Paul names such things as lying, losing your temper, stealing, corrupt speech, bitterness, and an unforgiving spirit. These sins invite Satan into your life, and they hurt you, harm the church, and grieve the Spirit of God. Is it worth it?

EPHESIANS 5

As he encourages us to live godly lives, Paul takes us to *the temple* (vv. 1–7) and reminds us of the sacrifice Jesus made for us. If we walk in love, our lives will be living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1–2; Phil. 2:17), fragrant to the Lord (John 12:1–8). Sin is ugly and a stench in God's nostrils (Isa. 3:24).

Then Paul goes to *the field* (vv. 8–14) and reminds us that walking in the light produces spiritual fruit (Gal. 5:22–23). If we walk in the light, we cannot have fellowship with the darkness (2 Cor. 6:14–18).

He takes us to *the marketplace* (vv. 15–17) and exhorts us to be like good merchants who know how to buy up an opportunity. When you walk in wisdom, you use your time wisely.

Then we follow him to *the banqueting hall* (vv. 18–21) and learn to walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16–26) and be joyful, thankful, and submissive to one another.

Paul's last visit is to *the home* (vv. 22–33) where he uses marriage as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. Christ *loved* us and died for us, but today He *loves* us and cares for us. This intimate life is pictured in the Song of Solomon and can be a reality for all who will yield to Him.

Under the Spirit's Influence

To be "filled with" means "to be controlled by" (Luke 4:28; 5:26). On the day of Pentecost, the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit and were accused of being drunk (Acts 2:13). Just as a drunk is influenced by alcohol, so a believer should be controlled by the Spirit. However, there are important differences. The drunk loses self-control, but the Spirit gives the believer self-control (Gal. 5:23). The drunk has an artificial happiness that does not last, while the Spirit-filled believer has a deep joy in the Lord. Drunken people do stupid things that hurt others and bring them embarrassment, but Spirit-filled believers help others and live to the glory of God.

EPHESIANS 6

Spirit-filled Christians will manifest Christlikeness in the home (vv. 1–4), on the job (vv. 5–9), and on the battlefield (vv. 10–20). If we do not learn to obey at home, we are not likely to be obedient on the job or in the army of the Lord. Likewise, if we have not learned to *take* orders, we will not be too successful at *giving* orders, either as parents or as employers.

The danger in the home is parents who are *authoritarian* but do not exercise loving spiritual *authority*. The danger on the job is the employee who is a clock-watcher and does not obey from the heart, and the "boss" who forgets that he is second in command and must one day give an account to the Lord.

The danger on the battlefield is that we do not take the enemy seriously and therefore fail to put on all of the armor. By

faith, you put on the armor through prayer, which must be done at the beginning of every day. Never underestimate the strategy and strength of the devil.

"Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus"

"Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
Stand in His strength alone;
The arm of flesh will fail you,
You dare not trust your own.
Put on the gospel armor,
Each piece put on with prayer;
Where duty calls or danger,
Be never wanting there."

George Duffield

PHILIPPIANS

Founded on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16), the church at Philippi was a source of real joy to him. Hearing that Paul was a prisoner in Rome, the Philippian believers sent a special love offering; and in this letter, Paul wrote to express his thanks. He also wrote to explain why Epaphroditus, their messenger, had been delayed and to encourage the believers to work together to bring unity to the church.

The overriding theme of the letter is Jesus Christ and the ministry of the gospel. Christ is the message of our ministry (chap. 1) as well as the model (chap. 2), the motive (chap. 3), and the means (chap. 4). The theme of joy is also woven throughout the letter. Despite his difficult circumstances, Paul rejoiced in the Lord and urged his readers to do so. After all, the joy of the Lord is the strength of Christian service (Neh. 8:10).

PHILIPPIANS 1

Paul wrote, "For to me, to live is Christ" (v. 21). But he did more than *write* that statement; he *lived* it. Jesus Christ is mentioned eighteen times in this chapter and is seen involved in many aspects of Paul's life.

His friends (1–11). Paul loved the saints in Philippi; he thought about them, prayed for them, and longed to see them. Christ made this fellowship possible.

His circumstances (12–18). He was a prisoner not of Rome but of Jesus Christ, and his chains were "in Christ" (v. 13). Paul was practicing Romans 8:28—and it worked! Do you think first of Christ when circumstances are difficult?

His future (19–26). Paul's life was in danger; if he lost the trial, he could be killed as an enemy of Rome. But when Christ

is your life, death is not your enemy; and you have the assurance of being with Christ when life ends.

His enemies (27–30). When you suffer, you suffer for Christ's sake; and you need not fear your enemies. The vital thing is that God's people unite in Christ and oppose the enemy, not one another!

Alive to Christ

"Life is what we are alive to," wrote Maltbie Babcock. Sports fans may be weary, but if they hear of an athletic event taking place, they come alive and want to attend. Hungry people are alive to the mention of food, and avid shoppers come alive at the announcement of a sale. So Christians are alive to all pertaining to Jesus Christ, for Christ is their very life.

PHILIPPIANS 2

Look out (1–11). Christ is the model for Christian life and service because He thought first of others, not of Himself. Do you look out for the interests of others, or do you think only of yourself? Do you have the servant attitude of Jesus Christ, willing to sacrifice for others? Will you empty yourself that others might be filled?

Work out (12–16). As you yield to the Lord, He works in and you work out; in this way, you fulfill His plan for your life (Eph. 2:10). God cannot shine *through* you until He works *in* you, so let Him have His way. You are a light in a dark world, a runner holding forth the living Word to a dead world.

Poured out (17–30). The image is that of the drink offering, poured out on the altar (Num. 15:1–10). Paul was willing to pour out his very life for the sake of the Lord and the church, and to do it *joyfully*. Timothy and Epaphroditus had the same attitude of service and sacrifice, giving themselves for others.

"I used to think that God's gifts were on shelves one above the other, and that the taller we grew in Christian character the more easily we could reach them. I now find that God's gifts are on shelves one beneath the other and that it is not a question of growing taller but of stooping lower."

F. B. Meyer

PHILIPPIANS 3

Rejoicing (1). If you cannot rejoice in your circumstances, you can always rejoice in the Lord who controls your circumstances. Fix your attention on Him. He may not change your situation, but He will change you; and that is even better.

Counting (2–11). What is important to you? Do you feel you have made sacrifices to follow the Lord? Paul did not feel he had lost anything worthwhile by trusting Christ. Instead, he gained everything really worth having.

Reaching (12–16). Christians are like runners who refuse to look around or look back but keep running with their eyes on the goal. To look back at past successes or failures, or to look around to see what others are doing or saying, is to invite defeat. Heed Hebrews 12:1–2.

Weeping (17–19). This is the only mention of tears in a letter devoted to joy. Paul wept over professed Christians who lived to please themselves. Instead of having the mind of Christ, they thought like the world, and these people are with us today.

Looking (20–21). Paul looked up and eagerly anticipated the return of the Lord. Christ had taken care of his past (v. 13), and He would also take care of his future. And as for Paul's present, his confidence was knowing that "He is able!" (v. 21).

PHILIPPIANS 4

The message of our ministry is the gospel of Christ (chap. 1). The model for our ministry is the example of Christ (chap. 2). The motive for our ministry is the reward of Christ (chap. 3). The means of our ministry is the provision of Christ (chap. 4).

He provides unity when we disagree with our fellow Christians (vv. 1–5), and peace when we are prone to worry (vv. 6–9). If we pray as we ought to pray and think as we ought to think, the peace of God will guard us, and the God of peace will go with us.

He provides the power we need for life and service (vv. 10–13) and the material needs we have as well (vv. 14–20). Paul did not have a wealthy organization giving him support, but he did have a great God who enabled generous friends to meet his needs. Paul saw their gift as a fragrant sacrifice to the Lord (v. 18), and he rejoiced in the Lord for what they did.

Reach Your Potential

Charles W. Koller affirmed that through Christ you can be what you ought to be (Phil. 4:11), do what you ought to do (v. 13), and have what you ought to have (v. 19), all to the glory of God.

COLOSSIANS

Epaphras, one of Paul's converts, founded the church in Colosse (1:7; 4:12–13); Paul had never been there personally (2:1). While imprisoned in Rome, Paul heard that false doctrines were being introduced in the church, so he wrote this letter to warn the believers and to establish them in the faith.

The key theme is the preeminence of Christ (1:18) because the false teachers made Christ one of several emanations from God. They mixed Christian truth with their doctrines of Jewish legalism and Oriental mysticism. Colossians is the perfect answer to the so-called New Age movement today, for Paul affirms that in Jesus Christ believers are complete and have the fullness of God available to them (2:9–10).

Chapters 1—2 are doctrinal and present Jesus Christ as the preeminent Creator, Savior, and Lord. Chapters 3—4 are practical and show how the believer works out the preeminence of Christ in daily living. Because the epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians were written about the same time, you will see parallels; but Ephesians emphasizes the body (the church), while Colossians emphasizes the Head of the body (Jesus Christ). The letters complement each other.

COLOSSIANS 1

The hope before you (1–12). These people were going to heaven! They had heard the Word and trusted the Savior, and they had given evidence of their faith by their love for God and God's people. God qualified them (v. 12); they did not save themselves.

The hope beneath you (13–23). Hope is a foundation on

which you stand when all around you is shaking. The city of Colosse was located in an earthquake area, so Paul's admonition was especially meaningful to them (v. 23). The false teachers wanted the saints to shift their foundation, but Paul pointed the church to Jesus Christ: Savior (vv. 13–14), eternal God (v. 15), Creator (vv. 16–17), and Head of the church (v. 18). What a perfect foundation for your hope!

The hope within you (24–29). Heaven is more than a destination; it is a motivation because Christ lives within. It is a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3) that affects how we think and act all day long. Because Christ is within us, we need not fear what is ahead.

Firstborn

"Firstborn over all creation" (Col. 1:15) does not mean Jesus was a created being and not eternal God, nor does "firstborn from the dead" (v. 18) mean He was the first one raised from the dead. Firstborn *is a term of honor and means "the highest, of first rank and importance." Jesus was prior to all creation (John 1:1–3) and is the highest in creation. He is the highest of all who were raised from the dead (Rev. 1:17–18).*

Thanksgiving

Note the emphasis on thanksgiving *in Colossians (1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2). The more wonderful we see Jesus to be, the more we will be grateful to God for Him and His blessings.*

COLOSSIANS 2

Paul wrote to the Colossians, "You must never allow anyone to come between you and Christ. In Him is all wisdom and knowledge (v. 3) and all the fullness of God (v. 9), and you are complete in Him (v. 10). Why accept a substitute?"

Let no one deceive you (4). Religious systems seem so inviting, and their leaders are so persuasive. But if you follow them, you will substitute man's ideas for God's truth.

Let no one cheat you (8). Here the thief is man-made philosophy and tradition, pleasing to the world but rejected by the Lord. If you have all fullness in Christ, why substitute man's empty philosophies?

Let no one judge you (16). Legalism is the robber here (v. 21), stealing your liberty in Christ and making you live by religious regulations instead of by God's grace.

Let no one defraud you (18). Here the culprit is religious mysticism that replaces spiritual nourishment from Christ with empty (but exciting) religious experiences.

You have in Christ all that you need. Beware substitutes!

"The greatest philosophy ever produced does not come within a thousand leagues of the fathomless profundity of our Lord's statements, e.g., 'Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart.'"

Oswald Chambers

COLOSSIANS 3

Having laid the doctrinal foundation, Paul now makes the personal application, for truth is something to *live* as well as to *learn*.

Put to death (1–7). In Christ, you have died to the old life and been raised to a new life (Rom. 6:1–14; Eph. 2:1–10), so make the new life the focus of your attention. Set your mind on it; seek to experience all that you have in Christ.

Put off (8–9). Like Lazarus (John 11:44), you must get rid of the graveclothes that belong to the old life. By faith, put off the old sins that bound you; Christ has set you free.

Put on (10–25). God wants you to wear the graceclothes, not the graveclothes! If your focus is on things heavenly, you will obey God in things on earth, especially in your relationships with others.

Filled with the Word

Colossians 3:16—4:1 parallels Ephesians 5:18—6:9, except that the emphasis here is on being filled with the Word *of God. When the Word controls your life, you will be joyful (3:16), thankful (3:17), and submissive (3:18—4:1), and these are the same characteristics of the Spirit-filled Christian as explained in Ephesians 5:18—6:9. To be filled with the Spirit of God means to be controlled by the Word of God.*

COLOSSIANS 4

Praying (2–4, 12–13). Prayer involves a persevering will, an alert mind, and a grateful heart; and our requests should be specific and related to the ministry of the Word. Paul asked not for an open prison door but for an open door of ministry (1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Rev. 3:7–8).

Witnessing (5–6). The unsaved are outside the family of God, and it is our task to bring them in. Effective witness involves walking wisely, being alert to every opportunity, and being careful in what we say and how we say it (1 Pet. 3:15–17).

Informing (7–9). Paul did not hesitate to share his needs with others, because he depended on their prayer support (Rom. 15:30; Eph. 6:19; Phil. 1:19; 1 Thess. 5:25; Philem. 22). Do you pray for Christian leaders in places of importance? They need it!

Serving (10–18). Paul names six men who were working at his side and encouraging him in the Lord. Even an apostle cannot get the job done alone, and how grateful he was for the saints serving faithfully in Colosse!

Servants of the Lord

Years before, Paul had refused to serve with John Mark (Acts 15:36–41) because Mark had left the work (Acts 13:5–13); but now Paul and John Mark were friends and colaborers. Luke had been a part of Paul's team since their ministry at Philippi (Acts 16:10). Alas, Demas would eventually forsake Paul and the Lord (Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:10). Do you pray for the men and women who serve with Christian leaders, that they might be faithful to the Lord?

THE THESSALONIAN EPISTLES

Acts 17:1–15 records the founding of the church in Thessalonica. Paul ministered there a short time, possibly only a month; but the Lord did a great work, and the witness of the church was known far and wide.

Paul had to leave the city and was not able to return, so he sent Timothy to see how things were going. Paul wrote the first letter from Corinth (Acts 18:5) in response to Timothy's report (3:6). He wanted to encourage the saints in their Christian walk and assure them of his love and concern.

The second letter was written a few months later to encourage the church to be steadfast in the midst of persecution. Some of the people thought the "day of the Lord" had come, so Paul dealt with that theme as well. Both letters emphasize the coming of Christ and the practical effect it should have on our lives.

THE THESSALONIAN EPISTLES

Servants of the Lord

FIRST THESSALONIANS

1 THESSALONIANS 1

Paul's description of the believers in Thessalonica suggests that they typify an ideal congregation. Ask yourself these questions.

Are others thankful for me (1–4)? Paul was grateful for their faith, hope, and love, and that these Christian qualities revealed themselves in work, labor, and patience. Can others tell that we belong to God? Are they thankful for our spiritual growth?

Jesus' Return

Every chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to the return of Jesus Christ, and that truth is applied to daily living. An eager looking for His return is an evidence of salvation (1:9–10), a motivation for soul winning (2:17–20), and an encouragement for holy living (3:11–13). This truth is a comfort in sorrow (4:18) and a stimulus to have more confidence in the Lord (5:23–24).

Is God's power seen in my life (5–7)? This comes when you receive the Word of God by faith and allow the Spirit of God to minister to your heart. It also involves suffering for the Lord and letting Him give you His joy.

Do I make it easier for others to talk about Jesus (8–10)? Some believers are such poor examples as Christians that their lives give unbelievers an excuse for rejecting Christ. But the Thessalonian Christians made it easy for Paul to preach the gospel! Their testimony had gone before him and met him wherever he went.

1 THESSALONIANS 2

Faithfulness (1–6). Paul's sufferings in Philippi might have made him hesitate to minister in Thessalonica, but he was a steward who wanted to be faithful to the Lord. His message and motive were pure, and God blessed his ministry. It is better to be approved by God and suffer than to be applauded by men and prosper. When you feel like quitting, keep going (1 Cor. 4:2).

Gentleness (7–9). Young believers need a spiritual parent to lovingly nurture them in the Lord. Paul's ministry was motivated by love, not by pride or the desire for material gain.

Blamelessness (10–12). How important it is to be good examples before young believers! Children do what we do, not what we say. Does your example as a Christian make it easier for others to grow?

Eagerness (13–16). These people had an appetite for the Word of God, and that helped them to grow (Jer. 15:16; 1 Pet. 2:2). When they heard God's Word, they eagerly welcomed it and put it to work immediately.

Hopefulness (17–20). Paul hoped to visit his beloved friends again; but even if they did not meet on earth, he would meet them at the coming of the Lord. When Jesus comes, will you rejoice in His presence because of people you have influenced for Christ?

1 THESSALONIANS 3

What should you do when people you love need your help, but you cannot go to them? The new believers in Thessalonica desperately needed Paul's ministry, but he was not able to return to help them. So, he did what he could.

First, he sent Timothy to minister to the church. If you cannot go, try to get somebody qualified to go in your place.

Then, he prayed for them (v. 10) because prayer is not limited by time or place. Your prayers for your loved ones will do more good than you realize, so keep praying.

Paul encouraged them by writing them at least two letters. His great concern was not their comfort or safety but their faith (vv. 2, 5–7, 10), their love (v. 12), and their obedience to the Lord (v. 13). Perhaps today you could write a letter or send a card to someone who needs your encouragement.

1 THESSALONIANS 4

"More and more" should be the desire of the dedicated Christian (vv. 1, 10).

More holiness (1–8). Your body belongs to God, and His will is that you use it for holy purposes. Christ purchased your body (1 Cor. 6:18–20), the Spirit dwells in your body (v. 8), and the Father has called you to holy living (v. 7). Disobey and the penalties are great!

More love (9–10). You are taught to love by the Father (1 John 4:19), the Son (John 13:34), and the Spirit (Rom. 5:5). Love is one mark of the true believer (1 John 3:14).

More quietness (11–12). Because they expected the Lord to return any day, some believers had quit their jobs and become idlers and meddlers (2 Thess. 3:6–15). What kind of testimony would this be to the lost?

More hope (13–18). Christians sorrow because God made us to weep; but it is not the hopeless sorrow of the world. Jesus is coming again, and that means reunion and eternal rejoicing!

1 THESSALONIANS 5

False peace (1–11). The "day of the Lord" is that time when God will pour out His wrath on the world. God's people have been saved from wrath, so they need not worry (v. 9; 1:10); but the lost world will be caught at a time when they think they are secure. To be ready for Christ's coming, God's people must be sober and live in the light.

Family peace (12–22). The local church fellowship should reflect God's peace; and it will if God's people obey authority, minister to one another, and submit to the Spirit of God.

Verse 21 emphasizes the positive and verse 22 the negative, and both are important.

Faithful peace (23–28). Holiness and peace go together (Isa. 32:17), for the God who quiets the heart also cleanses the heart (James 3:17). A disturbed heart is sometimes evidence of unconfessed sin. God is faithful; let Him bring purity and peace to your heart.

Welcome the Spirit's Ministry

"Do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thess. 5:19) is an admonition to Christians not to resist and reject the ministry of the Spirit. The image is that of fire (Isa. 34:4; Acts 2:3; Rev. 4:5). Just as fire brings light, heat, and cleansing, so the Spirit enlightens, enables, and purifies His people. Paul reminded Timothy to "stir up the gift of God" (2 Tim. 1:6), which means "get the fire burning again." Are you allowing the fire to go out on the altar of your life (Lev. 6:9, 12)?

"*I have noticed this, that when a man is full of the Holy Ghost, he is the very last man to be complaining of other people. He loves everybody too tenderly. He loves even a cold church, and is anxious to lift them up and bring them to a kinder feeling and sympathy.*"

D. L. Moody

SECOND THESSALONIANS

2 THESSALONIANS 1

Along with persecutions on the outside, the church was facing problems on the inside. Some people were suffering great trials for their faith. Others had quit working and were idlers. Still others were harboring the wrong idea that they were experiencing the "day of the Lord." Paul wrote this letter to encourage the suffering (chap. 1), enlighten the confused (chap. 2), and warn the careless (chap. 3).

In times of trial, the essential thing is your faith (v. 3). God will see you through, so trust His promises. Remember that others are watching you and you can encourage them (v. 4). You may be tempted to fight back, but leave that to the Lord (vv. 5–9).

"No pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown."

William Penn

The lost will be eternally separated from God's glory (v. 9), while the saved will bring glory to the Lord (v. 10). Meanwhile, be sure that God is glorified by your life today (vv. 11–12).

2 THESSALONIANS 2

Satan wants to shake the saints and make them lose their confidence, and one of his chief weapons is deception. Some-

one claimed to have a letter from Paul saying that the day of the Lord was present, and others said they had messages through the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:21). The believers forgot what Paul had taught them (v. 5), so they were trapped by the lies of the enemy.

The "times and seasons" of God's prophetic plan are in God's hands (Acts 1:6–8), and He has everything in control. A sequence of events is sketched here to assure us that the church is destined for salvation and not judgment (v. 13; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). The Spirit of God in this world is keeping God's program on schedule.

Beware "prophets" who contradict what God has already said in His Word (v. 15). If you stand on the Word, you will not fall for the devil's lies. God's people can face the future with assurance, hope, and comfort because of the unfailing grace of God (vv. 13–17).

2 THESSALONIANS 3

Conflict (1–2). Anyone who seeks to live for the Lord will have enemies (2 Tim. 3:12). The weapon we use is prayer, and the purpose for which we pray is the sharing of the Word of God (Col. 4:2–3). Not everybody in the church at Thessalonica was devoted to the Lord, but Paul still asked for their prayers.

"Work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God."

Dorothy L. Sayers

Confidence (3–5). God's faithfulness to us is the basis for our faithfulness to Him. If we love Him, we will keep His Word, and we will be patient in times of trial.

Command (6–15). The word *command* (vv. 4, 6, 10, 12) means "a military order." Some of the Christian soldiers in the church were breaking rank and disobeying orders, and Paul had to admonish them. Those who cannot work must be cared for by others, but those who *will not* work must be disciplined. Never let the bad example of others keep you from being a good example.

FIRST TIMOTHY

Paul's trial in Rome came out in his favor, and he was released. It is likely he went to Colosse to visit Philemon (Philem. 22). He may have written 1 Timothy from Colosse or from Philippi.

The child of a mixed marriage (Acts 16:1), Timothy was raised in a godly home (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15) and came to know Christ through Paul's ministry (1 Tim. 1:2). Paul added him to his team at Lystra (Acts 16:1–3) and made him one of his special assistants (Phil. 2:19–22). Timothy eventually was sent to pastor the church in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3).

First Timothy is a ministerial letter, telling pastors and people how they should conduct themselves in the local assembly (3:15). Paul stresses preaching the truth (chaps. 1, 4), praying (chap. 2), and appointing qualified leaders (chap. 3). He closes by giving counsel on how to minister to various kinds of people in the church (chaps. 5—6).

1 TIMOTHY 1

The work in Ephesus was not easy, and Timothy wanted a new assignment; but Paul urged him to stay where he was and get the job done (1:3). The next time you want to abandon your assigned place, consider the arguments Paul gave Timothy for staying where he was.

For the work's sake (1–11). What Paul warned the Ephesian elders about had come true: false teachers were in the church (Acts 20:28–30). The pastor's job is to warn them and teach the people the truth. If he abandoned the flock, Timothy would be a hireling and not a shepherd (John 10:12–13).

For the Lord's sake (12–17). Jesus died to save sinners, and

He lives to equip and enable His servants to do the work of the ministry. The same God who empowered Paul could empower Timothy—and can empower us today. God is faithful!

For our own sake (18–20). God had equipped Timothy, called him, and given him a solemn charge. There was a battle to fight, and he dare not run away. If we flee the post of duty, we rob ourselves of opportunities to grow, to serve, and to glorify God.

When the winds of adversity blow, set your sails in the right direction, and let Christ handle the rudder. Otherwise, you may be shipwrecked.

Responsibility *Someone defined* responsibility *as "our response to God's ability."*

1 TIMOTHY 2

What is the most vital ministry of the local church? According to Paul, it is *prayer*. Prayer moves the hand that governs the world. We must pray for government leaders, that the doors of ministry will be kept open and souls will be won to Christ. Because God's people do not pray for people in authority, wars close mission fields, officials do not grant needed visas, and the work of the Lord suffers.

"A good woman is the best thing on earth. Women were last at the cross and first at the open tomb. The church owes a debt to her faithful women which she can never estimate, to say nothing of the debt we owe in our homes to godly wives and mothers."

Vance Havner

Paul reminds Christian men that Christian women are important to the Lord and to the work of the church. The gospel brought freedom to women in the Roman Empire, but some of them did not know how to handle it and went to extremes asserting their liberty. Hence, the reminder about the spiritual leadership of the men in the church.

Modesty, true spiritual beauty (1 Pet. 3:1–6), godliness, and good works—these will characterize the woman God blesses.

"It is in willing submission, rather than grudging capitulation, that the woman in the church (whether married or single) and the wife in the home find their fulfillment."

Elisabeth Elliot

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1 TIMOTHY 3

Being a leader of God's people is a serious task, and no one should accept an office who is not qualified and willing to *use* that office to help the church.

Watching (1–7). The title *bishop* means "overseer" and describes the work of the elder (Acts 20:17, 28). God's people are like sheep; they need shepherds to watch over them, protect them, and lead them. Pray for your spiritual leaders that they might more and more be what God wants them to be.

Working (8–13). The word *deacon* means "servant." The deacons assist the elders in carrying out the work of the church (Acts 6:1–7). As with the elders, the deacons should be qualified spiritually and set the right example in their homes.

Worshiping (14–16). The church is much more than a group of like-minded people who assemble from time to time. The living God is in their midst (Matt. 18:20), and the truth of God has been deposited with them! They worship the Son of God who alone is worthy of praise! Yes, it is a serious thing to be a part of a local church. Do you take it seriously?

1 TIMOTHY 4

Watch yourself (1–5). Satan is at work spreading false doctrine, and his ministers are already in the church (2 Cor. 11:13–15). God's servants must preach the truth and fight the devil's lies. Declaring war may not make us popular, but it will keep us faithful.

Exercise yourself (6–10). If believers would put as much effort into the spiritual life as they do their recreation and hobbies, what a difference it would make! Physical exercise is important, but spiritual exercise is even more essential. Both discipline and devotion are needed to make a winning athlete and an effective Christian.

Give yourself (11–16). It takes real effort to grow in the Christian life and to be successful in Christian service. God asks for our wholehearted surrender, no matter what the cost. Ponder these admonitions that Paul wrote to Timothy and see how they apply in your life.

Advance!

The word translated "progress" in 1 Timothy 4:15 means "pioneer advance." As we walk with the Lord and serve Him, we must move into new territory and not stay the same spiritually. There are new truths to learn, new battles to fight, and new victories to win. "Restlessness is discontent," said Thomas Alva Edison, "and discontent is the first necessity of progress. Show me a thoroughly satisfied man and I will show you a failure."

1 TIMOTHY 5

What causes problems in churches? Often, it is people not getting along with each other. Brothers and sisters do not always dwell together in unity (Ps. 133).

Paul suggests that we treat other people the way we would treat members of our own family (vv. 1–2). If the older people complain about things, deal with them as you would your father or mother, and accept the younger believers as brothers and sisters. This is simply a call to love others as God loves you.

Not everybody who asks for help should receive it (vv. 3–16). Charity should begin at home (vv. 4, 16), and church leaders must exercise discernment lest they create more problems than they solve.

Sometimes trouble comes because we believe reports that cannot be verified (v. 19), or we show partiality (v. 21), or we make decisions before getting the facts (v. 22). Not every church member has a character as good as his or her reputation (vv. 24–25), so take care!

1 TIMOTHY 6

Watch your motives (1–2). Be obedient so you do not bring reproach on the Word (v. 1; Titus 2:10) or show disrespect for persons in authority over you (v. 2). Never take advantage of fellow believers; rather, do all you can to help them.

Watch your attitudes (3–5). Do you enjoy arguing about the Bible? Then search your heart to see if any of these sinful attitudes are hiding there. You can never debate people into the kingdom or into a more sanctified life.

Watch your values (6–10, 17–19). Are you content with the necessities of life, or must God give you luxuries? God wants you to enjoy His gifts (v. 17) and employ them for the good of others; but beware when your heart is set on getting rich (Prov. 15:27; Eccles. 5:10).

Watch your testimony (11–16). Know the things you should flee, follow, and fight, and do not confuse them. When you think it too difficult to stand up for the Lord, remember how He stood up for you.

Watch your stewardship (20–21). You have a deposit of spiritual truth to guard and invest (1:18; 2 Tim. 1:14; 2:2), and the enemy wants to take it from you. Beware those who want to give you "new knowledge" beyond what God says in His Word.

Proper Conduct

First Timothy tells you how to "conduct yourself in the house of God" (3:15). This involves exercising yourself (4:7), giving yourself (4:15), taking heed to yourself (4:16), saving yourself (4:16), keeping yourself pure (5:22), and withdrawing yourself from troublemakers (6:5). Are you taking care of yourself as the Lord directs?

SECOND TIMOTHY

Paul's freedom did not last long. He was arrested again, taken to Rome for trial, and eventually executed. He wrote this letter to his beloved son in the faith to encourage him to remain strong in the Lord (chaps. 1—2), to explain the perilous times (chap. 3), and to urge him to come to Rome as soon as possible (chap. 4). This very personal letter focuses on faithfulness in the ministry.

It was a difficult time for Paul. Not only was he facing trial and almost certain death, but he was abandoned by the believers who should have stood with him (1:15; 4:16). His statement in 4:6–8 is one of the greatest confessions of faith in the Bible.

We are now in those perilous times that Paul wrote about centuries ago. This letter teaches us how to live and serve successfully in them.

2 TIMOTHY 1

Perhaps some of the "enemies" that attacked Timothy are attacking you and making you want to give up.

Self-pity (4). Timothy was having a hard time in Ephesus and wanted to leave (1 Tim. 1:3). Perhaps that caused his tears. When you start feeling sorry for yourself, remember that others are praying for you and that God still honors your faith.

Neglect (6). Timothy had neglected his spiritual life (1 Tim. 4:14), and the flame was low on the altar of his heart. No wonder he needed to exercise himself (1 Tim. 4:7–8)!

Timidity (7). *Fear* in this verse means "cowardice" or "timidity." Timothy was not enthusiastic in his witness or ministry. The Holy Spirit can give us the resources we need to get the job done.

Shame (8, 12, 16). Paul was not ashamed of the gospel (Rom. 1:16) or of the Lord. His friend Onesiphorus was not ashamed of being identified with Paul (v. 16). Timothy should not be ashamed of either the Lord or Paul (v. 8).

Carelessness (13–14). Paul committed the message to Timothy, and Timothy's responsibility was to guard it (1 Tim. 6:20) and share it with others (2 Tim. 2:2). Again, the Spirit of God enables us to be faithful.

2 TIMOTHY 2

God's grace strengthens us and enables us to be faithful teachers (v. 2), soldiers (vv. 3–4), athletes (v. 5), farmers (v. 6), workers (v. 15), vessels (vv. 20–23), and servants (vv. 24–26). The world looks on us as evildoers; but we are God's elect, willing to live and die for Jesus Christ (vv. 8–13).

God's grace enables us to overcome our three great enemies: the world (v. 4), the flesh (v. 22), and the devil (v. 26).

God's grace enables us to endure hardship (vv. 3, 10) as we fight the Lord's battles, so that we do not deny the Lord (vv. 11–13). It helps us do work of which we are not ashamed (v. 15) and deal with problem people of whom we are not afraid (vv. 23–26).

"Grace is but glory begun, and glory is but grace perfected."

Jonathan Edwards

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2 TIMOTHY 3

Perilous in verse 1 means "difficult," "hard to deal with," or "dangerous." It is the same Greek word used to describe the demoniac in Matthew 8:28 and translated "exceedingly fierce." How do we live for Christ in such terrible times?

Expect them (1–9). The person who is looking for a soon-coming paradise on earth is destined for disappointment. To expect these perilous times is to become not a pessimist but a

realist. Note the emphasis on the wrong kind of love (vv. 2, 4).

Follow the right examples (10–12). We tend to emulate the people we admire, so be careful about the heroes you select. Modern-day Christian celebrities may not exemplify the lifestyle God wants us to have.

Stay with the Bible (13–17). Believe God's Word will save you (v. 15), mature you from childhood to adulthood (vv. 15, 17), and equip you to serve the Lord (v. 17). Satanic deception is rampant today and has infected the church (v. 13), and the only weapon that defeats the deceivers is God's inspired Word.

Watch for Counterfeits!

Jannes and Jambres (v. 8) were magicians in Pharaoh's court who imitated the miracles that Moses performed (Exod. 7:8–13). Satan is an imitator who produces counterfeit Christians (vv. 5, 13; 2 Cor. 11:13–15) who infiltrate the church and create divisions. God's people need discernment in these difficult days.

2 TIMOTHY 4

Christ is coming (1)! In view of this, we must know our task and be faithful to do it. Review 2 Corinthians 5:9–11, and read 1 John 2:28—3:2.

Apostasy is coming (2–5)! Indeed, it is now here. Many professed Christians have no "ear" for the Word of God. They prefer religious entertainment and sermons that will tickle their ears instead of cut their hearts.

Departure is coming (6–8)! Paul saw his approaching death as the offering of a sacrifice to God (v. 6; Phil. 2:17), the ending of a difficult race (v. 7), and the gaining of a glorious crown (v. 8; Rev. 2:10). This is the victor's crown given to winners at the Greek Olympic Games.

Help is coming (9–22)! Paul was greatly disappointed when

the people he had ministered to turned away from him and were ashamed of his bonds. He asked Timothy to come as soon as possible and to bring Mark with him. But best of all, the Lord came to Paul and encouraged him! No matter what His people may do, Jesus will never leave you or forsake you (Acts 18:9–11; Heb. 13:5–6).

Respond to Opportunities

Paul's plea, "Come before winter" (2 Tim. 4:21), is a reminder to us that opportunities do not wait forever. Once the winter season began, Timothy could not travel easily to Rome and see his beloved friend for the last time. "Before winter or never!" said Dr. Clarence Macartney in his famous sermon "Come Before Winter." He continued, "There are some things which will never be done unless they are done 'before winter.'" Are there opportunities you are neglecting today that may soon vanish forever? Are there people you should contact and decisions you should make? Today is yours; tomorrow may be too late. Come before winter!

TITUS

Titus was a Greek (Gal. 2:3) whom Paul won to Christ (Titus 1:4) and enlisted in service. Like Timothy, he became one of Paul's special assistants, sent to the churches to represent the apostle. He was serving in Crete when this letter was written. Paul wrote it, probably from Corinth, after his release from prison.

The letter emphasizes good works (1:16; 2:7, 14; 3:1, 8, 14). We are not saved by good works (3:5), but good works are one evidence of salvation. Apparently the saints on Crete were better at professing the faith than practicing it.

After his greeting (1:1–4), Paul gives the qualifications (1:5–9) and duties (1:10–16) of elders and urges Titus to organize the local churches and deal with the false teachers. He then tells Titus how to minister to various kinds of people in the church (2:1—3:11) and closes the letter with personal information (3:12–14) and a farewell (3:15).

TITUS 1

Titus wanted another assignment from Paul because he was having a hard time ministering in Crete. When you feel like quitting, follow the counsel Paul gave to Titus.

Focus on the privileges of ministry (1–4). God declares His truth through dedicated people, and it is a joy to share the Word with others. The angels in heaven would love to change places with us, so we should never cease to marvel that God would use us!

Obey the Word (5–9). Sometimes there are problems because unqualified people get into places of leadership or because places of leadership have not been filled. The Greek word translated "set in order" is a medical term that means

"to set a broken bone." The church body suffers when we avoid facing and solving serious problems.

Face the enemy (10–16). Perhaps like Timothy (2 Tim. 1:7), Titus was too timid to confront the enemy; but it had to be done. "Sound doctrine" (v. 9) means "healthy doctrine," teaching that contributes to the spiritual health of the church. Just as a physician must attack infection and disease, so local church leaders must attack false doctrine.

A Pure Mind

"To the pure all things are pure" (Titus 1:15) concerns false teaching about dietary laws (1 Tim. 4:2–5). It does not mean that a "pure mind" remains pure after beholding what is impure. When God's truth enlightens your conscience, you will know right from wrong and will avoid that which is evil. A defiled conscience is like a dirty window: no light can enter (Matt. 6:22–23).

TITUS 2

Living (1–10). Whether we are young or old, married or single, we are all needed in the local church; and God has a job for us to do. One test of spiritual fellowship is its ability to accept and minister to a variety of people. How we live either blasphemes the Word (v. 5) or beautifies it (v. 10), and those who minister should set the example (vv. 7–8).

Learning (11–12). God's grace not only saves us but also teaches us how to live the Christian life. Those who use God's grace as an excuse for sin have never experienced its saving power (Rom. 6:1; Jude 4). The same grace that redeems us also renews us so that we want to obey His Word (v. 14).

Looking (13–15). What starts with grace will lead to glory! The return of Jesus Christ for His people is more than a blessed hope; it is a joyful hope (Rom. 5:2; 12:12), a unifying

hope (Eph. 4:4), a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3), a stabilizing hope (Heb. 6:19), and a purifying hope (1 John 3:3).

"I never begin my work in the morning without thinking that perhaps He may interrupt my work and begin His own. I am not looking for death, I am looking for Him."

G. Campbell Morgan

TITUS 3

We all need frequent reminders!

Remember what you should do (1–2). Christians are citizens of earth as well as citizens of heaven, and they should be the kind of people described in these two brief verses.

Remember what you were (3). God has forgotten our sins, and we should, too; but it does us good to remember what it was like to be a lost sinner. (See Deut. 5:15; 15:15; 24:18, 22; 1 Pet. 4:1–4.)

Remember what God did for you (4–7). Did you deserve to hear the gospel and receive the gift of eternal life? No, it all happened because of God's kindness, love, and grace. "He saved us"—we did not save ourselves. He has washed away our sins; we stand justified in His sight; and we face the future confidently because we are the heirs of God.

Remember what God expects of you (8–11). A major theme in this letter is *good works* (1:16; 2:7, 14; 3:1, 8, 14). People who are busy for the Lord do not have time for useless arguments.

PHILEMON

Providence. While a prisoner in Rome, Paul met Onesimus ("unprofitable" [v. 11]), a runaway slave who belonged to Philemon, a friend Paul had led to Christ (v. 19). Paul won Onesimus to Christ and sent him back to his master in Colosse (Col. 4:7–9). The providence of God is amazing, that Paul and Onesimus should meet in the great city of Rome! Perhaps Philemon's prayers brought the men together (v. 22). Philemon certainly saw Romans 8:28 in action!

Friendship. Paul has so much good to say about Philemon. He was a beloved friend, a man of faith and love, a refreshing Christian, a praying man, a man who obeyed God's will. Can your friends say these things about you?

Accepted and Redeemed

Two statements in Paul's letter to Philemon remind us of what Jesus did for us. "Receive him [Onesimus] as you would me" (v. 17) reminds us that we are "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6). "Put that on my account" (v. 18) reminds us that Jesus paid the price for our redemption (Rom. 4:1–8; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Reconciliation. According to Roman law, Onesimus could have been executed for his crimes. But he had become a brother in Christ, and Philemon had to forgive him and take

him back. True reconciliation is not cheap; there is a price to pay. Paul knew this and was willing to pay the price himself. Can God use you as a reconciler? Are you willing to pay the price?

HEBREWS

The author of Hebrews is unknown to us, but the theme of the book is clear: "Let us go on to perfection [spiritual maturity]" (6:1). The epistle was written to Jewish believers who were tempted to abandon the fullness of Christ and go back to the emptiness of a religious system soon to be destroyed.

Lost people are still "in Egypt" and need to be redeemed through faith in Christ. Those who are redeemed are privileged to enter their spiritual inheritance ("Canaan") and enjoy His "rest" (4:11; Matt. 11:28–30). Entering Canaan is not a type of going to heaven. It is a picture of conquering the enemy and claiming your spiritual inheritance by faith.

But too many believers, like Israel in the Old Testament, are wandering in the wilderness of unbelief and yearning to go back to the old life. The message of Hebrews is especially for them: "Let us go on to maturity!"

Hebrews is one of three New Testament letters written to explain Habakkuk 2:4, "The just shall live by his faith." (See Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38.) The emphasis in Hebrews is on "by faith." God has spoken through His Son, and we must respond to that Word. Our response determines the kind of life we live and how much of our spiritual inheritance we claim. We are not only *saved* by faith, but we must *live* by faith.

One key word in Hebrews is *better*. Christ is better than the angels (chaps. 1—2) and better than Moses and Aaron (chaps. 3—6). He has a better priesthood (chap. 7), covenant (chap. 8), sanctuary (chap. 9), and sacrifice (chap. 10); and He gives His people a better life (chaps. 11—13), a life of faith.

As you meditate on this profound letter, ask yourself: Am I looking back and craving the old life, or am I pressing on by faith to claim my inheritance in Christ? Am I wandering in a

wilderness of unbelief or resting in His finished work and faithful Word?

HEBREWS 1

"God has spoken to us!" What a tremendous statement, and what a great responsibility it brings to you if you have heard His voice through His Word: "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks" (12:25). What you do with the Word of God determines what you will enjoy of God's will and claim of your inheritance.

Angels

Jesus is greater than the angels because He is the eternal Son of God Whom the angels worship and serve. Angels serve God's people (Heb. 1:14), even though we may not recognize them (Heb. 13:2; Gen. 18). Angels give special care to children (Matt. 18:10) and intervene in the lives of God's servants when they need special help (Acts 5:17–21; 12:1–10). When believers die, the angels escort them to glory (Luke 16:22); and when Christ returns, angels will accompany Him (Matt. 25:31). We must not worship angels (Rev. 22:9) or pray to them; but we can trust God to send them when we need them most.

Jesus Christ is the Father's last word. In Him, divine revelation is *seen* and *heard* in its fullness; and in Him, God's revelation is complete. When we see Him, we see the Father (John 14:1–11). Through Christ, we understand where everything came from, where it is going, what keeps it going, and why it is here.

We also understand what He has done for us. *He died for us!* Today He is enthroned in glory, ministering to us and for us (13:20–21). He wants to mature us and teach us how to walk by faith. One day He will defeat all His enemies and bring in His righteous kingdom.

With a Savior like that, why look for a substitute?

"Other men had the threads of truth; but Christ took the threads, and wove them into a glorious robe, put it on, and came forth clothed with every truth of God."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

HEBREWS 2

Hear Him (1–4). This is the first of five solemn admonitions to believers to pay attention to what God says in His Word. During Old Testament times, God dealt with those who disobeyed His Word. In these last days, we have a greater obligation to obey because we have the complete Scriptures and the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Are you serious about what God says to you?

Secure in the Promise

Ponder these verses: "We wish to see Jesus" (John 12:21), "We see Jesus" (Heb. 2:9), and "We shall see Him [Jesus]" (1 John 3:2). The first is the plea of the sinner; the second is the privilege of the saint; the third is the promise of the Scripture.

See Him (5–9). There is a "world to come," and how you live today will help to determine your place in the future kingdom of Christ (1:13; 10:13; 12:28). Today, we see man fallen in Adam; but by faith, we see Christ and His victory. Because He is glorified, we shall be glorified in Him!

Trust Him (10–18). Persons who trust Christ are God's children (v. 13) on their way to glory (v. 10). The Redeemer has defeated death and the devil, and He understands how His people feel as they face the temptations and trials of life. When you come to Him by faith, you come to a sympathetic High Priest who can meet your every need. Trust Him!

A Sensitive Heart

Hebrews is a book of exhortations (13:22). The word means "encouragement" and is a title for the Holy Spirit, the "Comforter, Helper" (John 14:16, 26). The writer encourages us not to neglect the Word (2:1–4), harden our hearts to the Word (3:7–19), become deaf to the Word (5:11–14), defy the Word (10:26–39) or disobey the Word deliberately (12:14–19). God deals in love with His people when they will not listen and obey (12:3ff.), so it pays to have a heart sensitive to God's voice.

HEBREWS 3

Consider Him (1–6). Hebrews focuses on Jesus Christ. The writer wants us to "see" Him (2:9), "consider" Him (3:1), and keep our eyes of faith fixed on Him (12:1–2). Whenever you are tempted to look at your circumstances or at yourself, look to Jesus by faith and rejoice in His faithfulness.

Obey Him (7–15). The writer uses the failure of Israel as a warning against a hard heart. How does a believer's heart become hard? By refusing His words, despising His works, and being ignorant of His ways. Sin is deceitful. You think you are

getting away with it, but all the while it is hardening your heart and robbing you of blessing.

Believe Him (16–19). Here is another exhortation to faith. The fact that the Jews were delivered from Egypt was no guarantee they would claim their inheritance. Because of their unbelief, they failed to enter the land (Num. 13). An "evil heart of unbelief" (v. 12) will rob you of what God has planned for you in your Christian life, so pay attention to God's Word. As Paul wrote, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

Are You Hearing?

People with hard hearts know the truth but resist it and refuse to obey it. They know that God chastens disobedient children, but they almost defy God to act. They think they can sin and get away with it. The first step toward a hard heart is neglect of the Word of God (Heb. 2:1–4), not taking it seriously. It is either "hearing" or "hardening." Take your choice (Ps. 95).

HEBREWS 4

His rest (1–10). Three different "rests" are in view: God's Sabbath rest after creation (v. 4; Gen. 2:2); Israel's rest of victory in Canaan (v. 3; Josh. 21:44); and the believer's rest of faith today (vv. 1, 9–10). Israel was delivered from Egypt, but a whole generation failed to enter Canaan and claim their promised inheritance. Why? Because of their unbelief. "Let us fear!" (v. 1).

His sight (11–13). God sees the heart and uses His sword to help us see our true spiritual condition (Jer. 17:9). Spend time daily reading the Word and meditating on it, always applying its truths to your heart. One day you will give account to God of what you have done with His Word, so be faithful.

His throne (14–16). You cannot claim your inheritance in your own power or wisdom. But you have a great High Priest who can give you the mercy and the grace you need just when you need them. He lives to intercede for you (7:25) and to help you do His will (13:20–21).

A Throne of Grace

To the unsaved, God's throne is a throne of judgment (Rev. 20:11–15); but to God's children, it is a throne of grace. When you are tempted, you can come to your great High Priest for mercy and grace. If you sin, you can come to your Advocate for forgiveness (1 John 1:9—2:2). The way is always open.

HEBREWS 5

Selected (1–6). Just as the Jewish high priest was appointed by God, so our great High Priest was appointed by the Father (Ps. 110:4); and He alone is worthy to serve. Never allow anybody to come between you and God, for Christ is the only mediator (1 Tim. 2:5). "The order of Melchizedek" refers to Genesis 14:18–24. Being from the tribe of Judah, Jesus could not serve as priest on earth; but He can serve as priest in heaven. He is there ministering for you today.

Perfected (7–10). Jesus had to prepare for His priestly ministry by experiencing the trials His people experience as they walk by faith (4:15). Because of the life that He lived and the death that He died, He is able to identify with your needs and give you grace to see you through. He understands!

Neglected (11–14). The "milk" of the Word represents the "first principles" of the Christian life, that is, what Jesus Christ did for us when He was on earth. The "meat" of the Word is the teaching about what Jesus is now doing for us in heaven, His ministry as High Priest. How sad it is when Christians neglect God's Word and stop growing in grace.

Mature in Christ

Mature believers understand the heavenly priesthood of Jesus Christ and know how to come to the throne of grace for help. They are skillful in using God's truth in their personal lives, and they can also teach others. Do you qualify?

HEBREWS 6

The impossible (1–8). The ABC's of the Christian life are important, but they must be a launching pad and not a parking lot, for the challenge is, "Let us go on to maturity." If we get sluggish (v. 12) and dull (5:11) toward the Word, we may fall by the wayside (v. 6; Gal. 6:1) and stop being fruitful. As long as disobedient believers are bringing shame to Christ, it is impossible to bring them to repentance, and God must deal with them.

The improbable (9–12). But the writer did not believe that his readers were in that condition. Although they had a long way to go in their Christian experience, the fruit was there. Diligence, faith, and patience are required to live the Christian life. Maturity is not automatic.

The immutable (13–20). The chapter ends with one of the greatest statements on security found anywhere in Scripture. God's promise and God's oath assure us that we are His, and God's character backs up His words. Instead of drifting (2:1), we are anchored heavenward where Jesus ministers in the very presence of God, and that anchor will not fail. We are anchored so we can make progress!

HEBREWS 7

With this chapter, the writer begins to explain the better priesthood of Christ; and he begins with the *better order,* the order of Melchizedek (Gen. 14).

Jesus Christ is both King and Priest, and His throne is a throne of grace (4:16). As King, He can control circumstances

around you; as Priest, He can change attitudes within you. You will experience righteousness and peace as you yield to Him (v. 2; Pss. 72:7; 85:9–10; Isa. 32:17).

Because He is a Priest forever, He saves forever (vv. 23–25). "To the uttermost" means "completely," "perfectly." You are secure as long as He lives, and He lives eternally. You can live by the power of His endless life!

A perfect salvation should lead to a life of growing maturity. An earthly priesthood can make nothing perfect (v. 11), nor can the law of God (v. 19) or the sacrifices (10:1–2); but Jesus can lead you into spiritual maturity as you walk by faith (13:20–21). He invites you to come to His throne, and He understands you better than you understand yourself.

HEBREWS 8

Finality (1). There were no chairs in the Jewish tabernacle or temple because the priests' work was never finished. But Jesus finished the work of redemption (John 19:30) and sat down on the throne (10:11–14). Rejoice!

Reality (2–6). The Jewish priests in the temple ministered with copies and shadows, but Christ in heaven ministers in the original sanctuary from which the things on earth were copied. When you trust Christ, you enter a life of reality, and you are forever finished with substitutes. Rejoice!

Maturity (7–13). The law of Moses was given to the children of Israel as a tutor to help them grow up and be prepared for their Messiah's coming (Gal. 4:1–7). They were like children; God had to take them by the hand and lead them. But the new covenant, with its heavenly priesthood, leads us to spiritual maturity: God puts His Word in our hearts and transforms our character (2 Cor. 3:1–3, 18).

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad!

HEBREWS 9

A better sanctuary (1–10). In every way, the present heavenly sanctuary is better than any sanctuary on earth, including the temple in Jerusalem. In the earthly temple, the furnishings were only symbols, the work was never finished, and the ministry could never change the human heart. We should

be grateful for the price Jesus paid to make His heavenly ministry possible.

A better service (11–15). The Jewish high priest could deal only with externals, but Jesus deals with the heart and conscience. He can purify us and perfect us (13:20–21) so that we can serve God acceptably. Do you come to Him daily and ask for His ministry?

A better sacrifice (16–28). The blood that purchased your eternal redemption came not from unwilling animals but from the Son of God who willingly laid down His life for you (John 10:14–18). The spotless Lamb of God had to die only once; the sacrifice need not be repeated. Have you trusted that blood to save you?

Jesus' Appearings

Hebrews 9:24–28 mentions three "appearings" of Jesus Christ: a past *appearing (v. 26) for our salvation, a* present *appearing (v. 24) for our sanctification, and a* future *appearing for our glorification (v. 28).*

HEBREWS 10

Forgiveness (1–18). The sacrifices under the Old covenant brought a *reminder* of sin, not a *remission* of sin. The blood of God's Son took care of sin once and for all. Because there is no more offering for sin, there is also no more remembrance of sin (v. 17; Jer. 31:34), and we can rejoice that we have a righteous standing before God.

Faithfulness (19–25). The same Savior who died for you now lives for you and invites you to come into His presence to worship and to share your needs. The Old Testament high priest could go behind the veil only once a year, but we can come into God's presence any time. Be sure that you are cleansed and prepared to meet Him. You can trust Him: "He who promised is faithful" (v. 23).

Fearfulness (26–39). The privilege of entering His presence brings with it the responsibility of obeying His precepts. This exhortation applies to those who repeatedly defy God's will and disgrace God's name. God deals with His children; He will not have them acting like rebels. The chapter closes on a note of encouragement. God warns us so that we will not be presumptuous, but He comforts us so that we will not be discouraged. The hard heart needs the warning; the broken heart needs the comfort.

HEBREWS 11

Faith is confidence in God that leads to obedience to God. True faith is based on what God says and is demonstrated in what we do. People with faith *do* things for God, and God does things for them.

Faith is not a luxury; it is a necessity. It is for common people and not just great leaders. We need faith for worshiping (v. 4) as well as for working (v. 7), walking (vv. 8–9), waiting (vv. 10–12), and warring (vv. 30–34). In any area of life where you ignore faith, you will sin (Rom. 14:23).

Steady in the Faith

The great theologian John Calvin defined faith *as "a steady and certain knowledge of the Divine benevolence towards us, which, being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, is both revealed to our minds, and confirmed to our hearts, by the Holy Spirit." Note that faith is founded on divine truth (God's promise) and is witnessed to by the Spirit in the heart. It has both objective and subjective aspects, and both are essential.*

The phrase "still others" (v. 36) reminds us that we can live by faith and appear to be defeated. Not everybody who

trusted God was delivered or protected (vv. 36–40). But the important thing is not God's deliverance; it is God's approval (v. 39). Faith in God gives you the ability to endure when others are giving up.

Where does this faith come from? Read Romans 10:17 and 15:4.

"Faith makes all things possible; love makes all things easy."

D. L. Moody

HEBREWS 12

Runners (1–4). The people listed in chapter 11 are the "cloud" that witnesses to us, "God can be trusted! Put your faith in His Word and keep running the race!" When you read the Old Testament, your faith should grow, for the account shows what God did in and through people who dared to trust His promises (Rom. 15:4). When you read the Gospels, you see the greatest example of endurance in Jesus Christ.

"You can judge the quality of their faith from the way they behave. Discipline is an index to doctrine."

Tertullian

Children (5–11). "Chastening" refers to child training, helping the child prepare for adulthood. It does not necessarily mean punishment for disobedience, although that sometimes might be included. The successful runner must exercise discipline and submit to training. Never fear the chastening hand of the Lord; it is controlled by a loving heart. God's goal is your maturity.

Citizens (12–29). The people of Israel had a frightening ex-

perience of law at Sinai (Exod. 19), but our experience at Mount Zion is one of grace and glory. We are citizens of the heavenly city and will one day fellowship with patriarchs and angels—and God! But this does not mean we can ignore His solemn voice to us. If God is shaking things in your life, listen to His Word. You will discover the things that cannot be shaken, and you will run the race to the end.

"We cry too often to be delivered from the punishment, instead of the sin that lies behind it. We are anxious to escape from the things that cause us pain rather than from the things that cause God pain."

G. Campbell Morgan

HEBREWS 13

Lest we get the idea that we can run the race successfully alone, the writer closes his letter by reminding us to follow our spiritual leaders. If we do, we will love the brothers and sisters (v. 1), help strangers (v. 2) and prisoners (v. 3), live above lust (v. 4) and covetousness (vv. 5–6), and not be led astray by false doctrines (v. 9).

Remember them (7–8). This may refer to leaders now dead, but their ministry goes on. Remember what they taught you, how they lived, and what they lived for. Church leaders may come and go, but Jesus is the same; and they must fix our eyes on Him.

Obey them (17). If they are faithful to care for your soul and teach you the Word, you have the responsibility to obey. A spiritual leader is not a dictator who drives you from behind. He is a shepherd who goes before and leads the way.

Pray for them (18–19). When you come to the throne of grace, ask God to make His shepherds faithful and fruitful.

Pray that the Great Shepherd will use them to "make you complete in every good work" (vv. 20–21).

Greet them (24). You should know your leaders personally and be on good terms with them. Let nothing come between you that could create problems in the fellowship (12:14–15).

JAMES

The man who wrote this letter was the half brother of our Lord (Mark 6:3) and the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14; 12:17; 1 Cor. 15:7). He was a devout Jew and wrote to Jewish believers scattered throughout the Roman world. They were troubled by trials and testings as well as by problems in their assemblies; and James wrote to help them mature in their faith (1:4; 2:22; 3:2).

The epistle of James is a practical book that discusses living the faith. It contains echoes of the Sermon on the Mount and the book of Proverbs, both of which are practical.

If we truly practice our faith, it will be seen in how we face trials (chap. 1), in the way we treat people (chap. 2), in what we say (chap. 3), in how we deal with sin in our lives (chap. 4), and in our prayer life (chap. 5).

JAMES 1

Note some essentials for mature living.

The wisdom of God (1–11). You need wisdom in trials so you will not waste your suffering and miss the spiritual growth that should result. When you trust God, trials work for you and not against you; but be sure your heart is wholly yielded to Him. If your heart and mind are divided, trials will tear you apart.

The goodness of God (12–20). When you realize how good God is to you, you will have no interest in the temptations the enemy puts before you. When you are tempted, count your blessings; and you will soon have strength to say no.

The Word of God (21–27). The Word gives us spiritual birth (v. 18; 1 Pet. 1:22–23). It is like seed planted in the heart that produces spiritual fruit (v. 21). It is a mirror that helps us ex-

amine ourselves (vv. 23–25) and cleanse our lives. We must *do* the Word of God, not just read it or study it; the blessing is in the *doing*.

"He is already half false who speculates on truth and does not do it. Truth is given, not to be contemplated, but to be done."

F. W. Robertson

Word Pictures

In his letter, James relies on many illustrations from nature. In chapter 1, he compares doubt to the waves of the sea (v. 6), riches to fading flowers (vv. 9–10), and sin to pregnancy (vv. 13–15; Ps. 7:14), weeds (v. 21), and dirt (v. 27). As you continue to read, notice how James uses pictures to make truth vivid and memorable.

JAMES 2

If you have true saving faith, you will practice *impartiality* (vv. 1–13) and see people in terms of character and not clothing. You will not cater to the rich or ignore the poor, but you will love each person for the sake of Jesus Christ. Christian love simply means treating others the way the Lord treats you and doing it in the power of the Spirit.

True saving faith is also seen in *activity* (vv. 14–26). Faith is not something you only talk about; it is something that motivates your life so that you think of others and serve them. Abraham was saved by faith (Gen. 15:6), but he proved that

faith by obeying God and offering his son (Gen. 22). Rahab was saved by trusting God (Heb. 11:31), but she showed the reality of her faith by protecting the spies (Josh. 2; 6:17–27).

James and Paul do not contradict each other (Rom. 4:1–5; 5:1); they complement each other. We are justified (declared righteous) before God by faith, but we are justified before men by works. God can see our faith, but men can see only our works.

JAMES 3

The believers James wrote to were having problems with their tongues (1:26; 2:12; 4:1, 11–12). Of course, the tongue is not the problem; it is the *heart* (v. 14; Matt. 12:35–37). But before you say anything, ask yourself some questions.

Who is in control (1–4)? If your tongue is under God's control, you will take what you say seriously (v. 1), and your whole body will be under His discipline (v. 2). Just as a horse needs a rider holding the reins, and a ship needs a pilot at the rudder, so your tongue needs a master; and God is the only one who can do the job. Psalm 141:1–4 is a good prayer if you need help in this area.

"Of your unspoken words, you are the master; of your spoken words, the servant; of your written words, the slave."

Quaker Proverb

What will the consequences be (5–12)? Are you starting a fire that may get out of control and do a lot of damage? Are you turning loose a dangerous beast or poisoning a refreshing spring? Once your words are spoken, you cannot take them back, so look ahead.

What are my motives (13–18)? Is there bitterness in your heart or envy? Are you speaking from God's wisdom or the wisdom of the world? Are you a peacemaker or a trouble-

maker? If your heart is right before God (Heb. 4:12), He will use your words to produce the right kind of fruit.

JAMES 4

Of the early church, it was said, "Behold how they love one another!" Today, people might say, "Behold how they compete with one another!" Why is it sometimes so difficult for God's people to get along?

Selfishness (1–3). The wars among us are caused by the wars within us. We want to please ourselves, even if it hurts somebody else. If we are not careful, even our prayers can become selfish!

Worldliness (4). Because Abraham was separated from sin, he was the friend of God (2:23); but Lot was the friend of the world (Gen. 13:1–13). Ponder 1 John 2:15–17.

Pride (5–10). Satan knows how to use pride to defeat you as he defeated Eve (Gen. 3:1–6). Are you laughing when you should be weeping over your sins? Are you resisting the devil or resisting the Lord?

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"It is right for the church to be in the world; it is wrong for the world to be in the church. A boat in water is good; that is what boats are for. However, water inside the boat causes it to sink."

Harold Lindsell

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"A whole new generation of Christians has come up believing that it is possible to 'accept' Christ without forsaking the world."

A. W. Tozer

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Criticism (11–12). One of the easiest ways to hide our sins is to expose the sins of others. Gossip and slander grieve the Spirit and divide the family. God called us to be witnesses, not judges!

Boasting (13–17). Life is short and the future unknown, so do the will of God today. When you make plans, always say, "If the Lord wills" (Prov. 27:1).

JAMES 5

In these last days, before the coming of the Lord, what does God want in our lives?

Priorities (1–6). To live only to get wealth is to rob yourself of true riches (1 Tim. 6:6–10, 17–19). It is to worry instead of worship (Matt. 6:19–34). God knows you have needs, and He will meet them if you practice Matthew 6:33.

Patience (7–12). If you have sown the right seed, you will eventually reap a harvest of blessing, so be patient. If others have exploited you, be patient; the Judge is at the door. If you are going through trials, be patient; God is still on the throne.

Prayer (13–18). Many kinds of prayer are named here: prayer for the sick, prayer for forgiveness, prayer for the nation, even prayer about the weather. There is no need that prayer cannot meet and no problem that prayer cannot solve.

Personal concern (19–20). Once again, James emphasizes ministry to individuals (1:27; 2:1–4, 14–16). Can you detect when a fellow believer starts to stray? Are you truly concerned? Will you try to help? Will you wait too long?

FIRST PETER

The apostle Peter was chosen to be the first to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10; 15:7), but his ministry was primarily to the Jews (Gal. 2:1–10). He wrote these two letters to believers scattered in five areas of the Roman Empire, two of which Paul had not been allowed to enter (Acts 16:7). In writing these letters, Peter fulfilled the commission given him in Luke 22:32 and John 21:15–17.

The theme of the first letter is *the grace of God* (5:12), and Peter tells us how to live as aliens in a hostile world. The theme of the second letter is *spiritual knowledge* (he uses *knowledge* seven times in the letter), and he warns us about false teachers.

Peter opens his first epistle by reminding his readers of what God's grace has done for them in saving them (1:1—2:10). He then points out that God's grace helps them in various relationships of life (2:11—3:12) and in the coming time of persecution (3:13—5:14). Peter sums up the themes of both letters in his benediction in 2 Peter 3:18: "But grow in the grace [1 Pet.] and knowledge [2 Pet.] of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." That is the only way to succeed in these last days.

1 PETER 1

Salvation is a calling (1–2, 15). We are chosen by the Father, who gives us the new birth (v. 3). We are set apart by the Spirit, who gave the Word and enables God's servants to declare it (vv. 10–12), and gives sinners the faith to believe the promise (v. 22). We have been purchased by the blood of God's Son (vv. 18–21), who died for us, rose again, and is coming for us to give us our inheritance (vv. 3–4, 13). No wonder Peter opened his letter with a song of praise! (See Eph. 1:3–14.)

Salvation is a birth (3, 23). This is the spiritual birth Jesus tried to explain to Nicodemus (John 3). When you put your *faith* in Jesus Christ (vv. 5, 7, 9, 21), you are born from above. You receive *hope* (vv. 3–4, 13, 21) and *love* for Christ (v. 8) and His people (v. 22). Because we are God's children, we want to obey Him (vv. 14–16).

Salvation is a redemption (17–21). The apostle is referring to the Passover Feast (Exod. 12). Jesus is the Lamb slain for us, and His blood was sprinkled to shelter us (v. 2). The Jews in Egypt had to be ready to depart, and we must have the same attitude (v. 13). When Jesus comes again, we will make our exodus from this world!

And all of this was "for you" (vv. 4, 10, 12, 13, 20, 25). Are you praising Him?

Living Hope

Men's hopes are dead hopes. Like cut flowers, they bloom awhile and then fade and die (1 Pet. 1:24–25). The Christian's hope is fresh and fruitful because it is a "living hope" (v. 3), purchased by the living Christ (v. 3) and promised in the living Word (v. 23).

1 PETER 2

Growing (1–3). Just as a baby has an appetite for the mother's milk, so the child of God has an appetite for the Father's Word. If you lose that appetite and stop growing, check to see if any of the sins listed in verse 1 are infecting your life.

Building (4–8). God is building a temple out of living stones (Eph. 2:19–22), and we are privileged to be part of it. We are built on Jesus Christ, so there is no way the temple can be destroyed.

Sacrificing (9–10). Each believer is a priest before God and can bring sacrifices to the Lord through Jesus Christ. As we

worship the Lord, we proclaim His virtues to a lost world. That is what God called Israel to do (Exod. 19:1–9), and they failed. Are we also failing?

Abstaining (11–12). As strangers whose citizenship is in heaven, we are carefully watched by the world; and we must live to glorify God. It may be difficult today, but it will be worth it when Jesus returns.

Submitting (13–25). Peter's counsel is that Christians be good citizens and employees so that God will be glorified. (See Jeremiah's advice to the captives [Jer. 29].) The example for us to follow is Jesus Christ who submitted even to death.

1 PETER 3

Peter compared believers to sheep (2:25), and sheep are gentle animals. He then called for Christians to practice gentleness in several areas of life.

In the home (1–7). Christian wives with unsaved husbands should seek to win them to the Lord with true spiritual beauty and not with artificial glamour or nagging. External glamour may fade, but a meek and quiet spirit is incorruptible. Husbands should live as though their wives were priceless porcelain vases and treat them with gentle love.

In the church (8–12). Imagine having to remind Christians to show one another love and courtesy! But as James 4 shows, not every local assembly is a place of peace.

In the world (13–22). Anybody can suffer for doing wrong, but Christians must learn to suffer for doing what is right. Of course, Jesus is the example for us to follow (v. 18; 2:18–25). We witness not by making noise and fighting back but by showing meekness and fear (v. 15). A gentle witness can make a big difference in a violent world.

"Nothing is so strong as gentleness, and nothing so gentle as real strength."

Francis de Sales

A Godly Life

The Christians who received Peter's letter were being slandered by others (2:12, 15, 23; 3:9, 16; 4:4, 14). Peter told them that the best weapon against slander was a godly life that nobody could criticize. H. A. Ironside said, "If what they say about you is true, mend your ways. If it isn't true, forget it, and go on and serve the Lord."

1 PETER 4

Do not be controlled by the past (1–6). People who have been born again through faith in Christ (1:23) should not allow the old life to control them. The past has been buried, and they are new creatures in Christ. Furthermore, life is too short to waste it on godless living, especially when you realize that one day we will all stand before God.

Persecution

Peter said that judgment begins at the house (church) of God (1 Pet. 4:17). The first purpose of persecution is to purify the church so that it will be able to witness to the lost. But it is also a warning to the lost. If God judges His own children for their sins, how much more will He judge lost sinners! (See Prov. 11:31; Ezek. 9.)

Be serious about the present (7–11). No matter how difficult life may be, there is a job to do; and we must be faithful. Take time to pray. Show love to the saints. Use your gifts and tal-

ents to serve others. The Lord who gave you the ability will also give you the strength to use it for His glory.

Be prepared for the future (12–19). A "fiery trial" was about to come to the church. Peter told his readers to expect it, use it as an opportunity to witness for Christ, and in all things seek to glorify God. The trial came under the Roman emperor Nero who accused the Christians of burning Rome. The church today faces persecution. Are you prepared?

1 PETER 5

Even apart from the end-times suffering that the church will experience, believers must face their three great enemies.

The world (1–4). Christian leaders are tempted to act like the world and "lord it over" God's people (Matt. 20:20–28). But leaders are shepherds, and sheep must be *led*, not *driven*. Our service must be willing and humble; we must be eager to help others.

The flesh (5–7). By nature, we do not want to submit to others. The phrase "clothed with humility" reminds us of our Savior when He wore a towel and washed Peter's feet (John 13:1–11). If we are submitted to the Lord, we will submit to His people. Humility leads to honor; pride leads to shame.

The devil (8–14). The devil is an adversary, not a friend; he is a roaring lion, not a playful pet. He wants to devour you, and you had better be on guard. Peter thought he was well able to defeat the enemy, so he did not heed the Lord's warning (Luke 22:31–34). The results were failure and shame. You can resist Satan by faith if you are wearing the armor and trusting the Spirit (Eph. 6:10–20).

SECOND PETER

When he wrote 2 Peter, the apostle was conscious that death was near (1:13–14) and that the church was in danger, for false teachers were creeping in. He urged the believers to hold to the precious Word and grow spiritually (chap. 1), to identify and shun false teachers (chap. 2), and to keep the promise of Christ's return uppermost in their hearts (chap. 3). He stressed *spiritual knowledge* that comes from God's Word.

2 PETER 1

Power for the present (1–11). When you trusted Christ, He gave you all that you need for life and godliness. All you have to do is to appropriate what you need from His resources. His Word feeds the divine nature within, and you can grow in knowledge and in grace. This is not automatic; you must be diligent to use the means of grace that God has provided.

Assurance from the past (12–18). Peter would be martyred soon (John 21:18), so he took occasion to remind his readers that they could trust the Word of God. Although Peter's experience on the Mount of Transfiguration was wonderful (Matt. 17:1–13), experiences are not a substitute for the unchanging Word of God.

Hope for the future (19–21). The Word is a light in this dark world, pointing to the return of the Lord. "Private interpretation" means that no prophecy should be isolated from the rest of Scripture or interpreted apart from the leading of the Spirit who gave it to us. The Spirit wrote one Book, and it must be understood as a whole. Believers may differ on individual matters of prophecy, but they all agree on the "one hope" (Eph. 4:4)—Jesus is coming again!

2 PETER 2

The description of the false teachers is clear enough to help you detect them and vivid enough to make you want to avoid them. It is not enough to reject their false teachings. You must also reject their way of life and the hypocrisy behind it.

Their tool is deception, so you must know God's Word and exercise discernment when you hear their impressive language (v. 18) and alluring promises (v. 19). They fellowship with you only to find out what they can get from you (vv. 12–14), and then they will leave you in worse shape than they found you. They are deceptive and destructive, so beware!

Their purpose is personal pleasure and financial gain, and their destiny is judgment. Like Balaam (Num. 22—24), they cause others to sin by using religion for personal gain. They are not God's sheep; they are pigs and dogs in sheep's clothing (Prov. 26:11; Matt. 7:15) and eventually go back to their natural habits. True sheep keep themselves clean because they follow the Shepherd (John 10:27–28).

2 PETER 3

When false teachers cannot accomplish their devious purposes with lies, they start to scoff and ridicule the Word of God. They want you to forget that the very Word they deride is in control of God's universe. God created everything by His Word, and His Word holds it together (Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:1–2). His Word caused the Flood (Gen. 6—9), and His Word will one day bring a judgment of fire to the ungodly world (vv. 7–10).

"The Dreadful Day"

"The darkness grows thicker around us, and godly servants of the Most High become rarer and more rare. Impiety and licentiousness are rampant throughout the world, and we live like pigs, like wild beasts, devoid of all reason. But a voice will soon be heard thundering forth: 'Be-

hold, the bridegroom cometh!' God will not be able to bear this wicked world much longer, but will come, with the dreadful day, and chastise the scorners of his Word." Does that sound like a statement by one of our contemporary prophetic preachers? It was said by Martin Luther, who lived from 1483 to 1546. If Luther felt that the Lord's return was near in his day, what should we think today!

Whoever robs you of God's Word robs you of your future. People who have no future hope have no motivation for life today. No wonder Peter closes with "Beloved, be diligent!" (v. 14) and "Beloved, beware!" (v. 17). We live in dangerous days, but the opportunities have never been greater. God is patiently waiting for the lost to trust Christ (v. 15), but he needs you to share the gospel with them.

FIRST JOHN

The apostle wrote this letter to his dear "little children" (the phrase is used nine times) to help them find assurance of personal salvation (5:13). When you are sure of your salvation, you can have fellowship with God and God's people (1:3), experience joy (1:4), and have victory over sin (2:1–2). John also wrote to warn believers about false teachers (2:26–27; 4:1–6). Both Peter and John were concerned about purity of doctrine in the church; and we should be, too.

Chapters 1—2 focus on *fellowship* and contrast *saying* and *doing*. It is easy to talk the Christian life, but God wants the walk. John emphasizes *sonship* in chapters 3—5 (the phrase "born of God" is used several times) and gives three marks of the true child of God: doing God's will (chap. 3), loving the brethren (chap. 4), and believing the truth (chap. 5).

"God is light" (1:5), and His children should walk in the light. "God is love" (4:8, 16), and His children should walk in love. "The Spirit is truth" (5:6), and God's children should believe and obey the truth.

1 JOHN 1

God wants you to have a *living fellowship* (vv. 1–3) with Him and His children. In Jesus Christ, He has revealed what true life really is. Even though you cannot see Him and touch Him as the apostles did centuries ago, He can still be real to you as His Holy Spirit opens the Word to your heart.

He wants you to have a *joyful fellowship* (v. 4). It is not the fellowship of a slave with a master but that of a child with a parent. God delights in His children (Ps. 18:19) and longs to share His love with them (John 14:19–24). When you are happy in the will of God, you are ready to live for Him and serve Him.

He wants you to have an *honest fellowship* (vv. 5–10). This means "walking in the light" and dealing honestly with sin. Salvation is a matter of life or death, but fellowship is a matter of light or darkness. If you lie to God, to others, and to yourselves, you will lose your fellowship with God and your character. A godly character does not develop in the darkness.

"Some Christians try to go to heaven alone, in solitude. But believers are not compared to bears or lions or other animals that wander alone. Those who belong to Christ are sheep in this respect, that they love to get together. Sheep go in flocks, and so do God's people."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

His Life Was Manifested

Manifest *is one of John's favorite words. Jesus was manifested that He might reveal God's life (1 John 1:2), take away our sins (3:5), destroy the devil's works (3:8), and disclose God's love for sinners (4:9).*

1 JOHN 2

In Jesus Christ, you have *an Advocate* (vv. 1–2), representing you before God's throne (Zech. 3). When you sin, confess it to Him, and receive His faithful forgiveness.

In Him, you also have *an example* (vv. 3–6), and you should "walk just as He walked." Ask the indwelling Holy Spirit to make you more like Jesus Christ, and saturate yourself with His life as you read the Gospels.

From Jesus Christ, you have *a commandment* (vv. 7–11) to love God's people. The Father gave this commandment to Is-

rael (Lev. 19:18) and the Son to His disciples (John 13:34), and the Spirit enables us to obey it (Rom. 5:5).

Because of Jesus Christ, you have *a family* (vv. 12–14). The members are at different stages of spiritual development, but all can receive the Word and grow. How wonderful it is when the "little children" become young men and then fathers!

You also have *some enemies* (vv. 15–27), the world and the false teachers. Christians who love the world lose the enjoyment of the Father's love and the desire to do His will. We overcome the world with God's love and the liars with God's truth (vv. 24–27).

You have *a wonderful hope* (vv. 28–29), the coming of Jesus Christ. Abide in Him so you will not be ashamed when He comes.

1 JOHN 3

Deliberate sin is a serious thing. When you deliberately sin, you grieve the heart of the Father who loves you and has a wonderful future planned for you (vv. 1–3). You grieve the Savior who died for you and delivered you from the power of Satan (vv. 4–8).

Deliberate sin grieves the Holy Spirit who lives in you and gave you new birth (vv. 9–15). You have a new nature and a new Father; therefore, you should live a new life. To John, lack of love is the same as hatred; and hatred is the moral equivalent of murder (Matt. 5:21–26).

Deliberate sin also grieves God's people (vv. 16–24) because we cannot minister to them as we should if we are not walking in love and in the light. Strive to have a heart that is right before God and men (Acts 24:16). Ask God to use you to be an encouragement and help to others (James 2). Love is more than a matter of words (v. 18).

1 JOHN 4

Love is evidence of salvation. If you are born of God through faith in Jesus Christ, you have His nature within (2 Pet. 1:4). Since "God is love" (vv. 8, 16), His children who have His nature should also manifest His love. The children should be like the Father!

Our love for others makes God's love real and visible to them (v. 12) so we can better witness to them about Christ. It also makes God real and personal to us. Merely reading in the Bible about God's love is not enough. Seek to *experience* that love in your heart by sharing it with others.

Just as truth is victorious over lies (vv. 1–6), love is victorious over fear (vv. 17–19). As you mature in your love for God, you realize that you have nothing to fear, for your Father has everything under control. You trust those you love, and faith and love will give victory over fear.

1 JOHN 5

When you are born of God, you are born to love (vv. 1–3). You will love the Father who gave you life and the Son who gave His life for you. You will also love His children, for you all belong to the same family.

When you are born of God, you are born to win (vv. 4–5). Your first birth made you a sinner and a loser, but your second birth makes you a conqueror. The world wants to entice you (2:15–17) and the devil wants to seduce you (Gen. 3:6), but Christ will give you the victory you need if you trust Him.

When you are born of God, you are born to assurance (vv. 6–13), and you can know that you have eternal life. You are also born to talk to your Father in prayer and receive from Him what you need (vv. 14–17).

When you are born of God, you are born secure, and the evil one cannot harm you (vv. 18–21). You do not keep yourself saved, for the Father does that (John 10:27–30); but you keep yourself from the clutches of the wicked one. As you abide in Christ, you experience His love and care.

SECOND JOHN

John wrote this letter to an anonymous Christian woman whose home was open for God's people to meet for fellowship and worship. The emphasis is on truth and love, and John points out three dangers believers must avoid.

Knowing the truth but not practicing it (1–6). We must walk in truth and walk according to His commandments. The Word of God is meant for *doing* and not just *knowing*. "If we say" (1 John 1:6, 8, 10) but do not obey, we are hypocrites.

Practicing truth but not defending it (7–8, 10–11). The enemy is busy, and we must oppose him. Love must be balanced by truth (Eph. 4:15), or you will start supporting lies in the name of love (Phil. 1:9–11). It is easy to lose what you have gained by making friends with the wrong people.

Going beyond the truth (9). The word *transgress* means "to go beyond." When you go beyond God's Word, you are going too far. It is not progress but regress. Beware anybody who has something to add to your Bible.

"Truth is always strong, no matter how weak it looks, and falsehood is always weak, no matter how strong it looks."

Phillips Brooks

THIRD JOHN

John wrote this letter to his friend Gaius to encourage him in a difficult situation in his local church. Again, he concentrated on making God's truth a vital part of life.

Walking in truth (1–4). People could see the truth in Gaius because he loved it and walked in obedience to it, and that brought great joy to John. Every Christian parent can echo verse 4 and even make it a prayer.

Working for truth (5–8). When you assist and encourage God's servants, you become a fellow worker with them in spreading the truth. Christian hospitality was important in those days and ought to be revived today.

Welcoming the truth (9–10). Can you imagine Diotrephes rejecting a message from the apostle John! He was so "separated" that he did not even receive John's friends. When we welcome God's people, we welcome God's truth.

Witnessing for the truth (11–14). Not all church members are like Diotrephes; there are people like Demetrius who love the truth and live it. They are the ones who make the local church healthy (v. 2).

JUDE

Jude, like James, was a half brother of the Lord Jesus (Mark 6:3). His letter focuses on false teachers and echoes Peter's warnings in 2 Peter 2.

Who they are (1–4). Jude wanted to write about salvation, but the Lord directed him to write about invasion instead. False teachers were creeping into the church and going undetected. These are unsaved people (v. 19), ungodly people, and unprincipled people who use grace as an excuse for sin.

Seek Wisdom

In trying to minister to people, we must be careful and exercise discernment lest they do us more harm than we do good (Jude 22–23). Concerning the Pharisees, Jesus said to His disciples, "Let them alone" (Matt. 15:14). God told the prophet Hosea, "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone" (Hos. 4:17). And Paul told Timothy to withdraw himself from certain troublemakers (1 Tim. 6:3–5). Ask God for wisdom as you seek to help persons wandering from the faith.

What they do (5–11). Like the Jews in the wilderness, the fallen angels, and the evil cities of the plain, they reject the authority of God. Their words are defiant and defiling. Like Cain (Gen. 4), they have no saving faith, but they do have reli-

gion. Like Balaam (Num. 22–24), they use religion as a way to make money; and like Korah (Num. 16), they defy the Word of God and the authority of God's chosen servants.

What they are (12–16). False teachers promise much but produce little, like rainless clouds and fruitless trees. Enoch had the best word for them: *ungodly*.

What we must do (17–25). Remember the Word and build yourself up in your Christian faith. True believers are "preserved in Jesus Christ" (v. 1), and they prove this by keeping themselves in God's love (v. 21). Therefore, God can keep them from falling (vv. 24–25).

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

John was a Roman prisoner on the Isle of Patmos when God gave him this revelation of Jesus Christ. The book reveals Jesus Christ the Priest-King (chap. 1), the Judge of the churches (chaps. 2—3), the Creator (chap. 4), the Redeemer (chap. 5), the Lord of history (chaps. 6—18), the Conqueror (chaps. 19—20), and the Bridegroom (chaps. 21—22). The key name for Christ in this book is *the Lamb*. John never lets you forget that Jesus died for the sins of the world (John 1:29).

Another key word is *throne*, used over forty times. The Revelation describes the conflict between the throne of the Lamb in heaven and the throne of Satan on earth. As John writes, he depicts worship in heaven and warfare on earth; and the Lord is the victor. No matter how dark the day or how strong the forces of evil, the Lamb of God wins the victory.

The key verse is 1:19. John was told to write "the things which you have seen [chap. 1], and the things which are [chaps. 2—3], and the things which will take place after this [chaps. 4—22]."

Revelation 6—19 parallels Matthew 24 and Mark 13 in describing the day of the Lord or the Tribulation. The first part is described in chapters 6—9; the middle in chapters 10—14; and the last part ("the great tribulation") in chapters 15—19. While good and godly people disagree on the details of interpreting John's numbers and symbols, most agree that the last days will be marked by the increase of evil, the rise of a world government and world ruler, the attempt of Satan to destroy God's people, the pouring out of God's wrath on a rebellious world, and the return of Jesus Christ to deliver His own and establish His kingdom.

As you read, do not get lost in details, but try to see the big picture. And keep in mind that John wrote this book to encourage believers who were going through persecution. Every generation of Christians has had its Antichrist and Babylon, and the hope of the Lord's return has kept the saints going when the going was tough.

Revelation is the climax of the Bible, the fulfillment of what God started in Genesis. Many symbols in Genesis are found in this fascinating book: light and darkness, stars, Babylon, the bride, a garden, a tree of life, a serpent, and so on. He is "the Alpha and the Omega" (1:8). What He starts, He finishes.

REVELATION 1

This book is first of all the revelation of Jesus Christ, not just the revelation of future events. Before John describes end-time events, he describes the Lord Jesus and reminds you of who He is and what He has done.

A Blessed Book

You will find seven "beatitudes" in Revelation: 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14. It is indeed a book with a blessing!

Let Your Light Shine

In the Old Testament tabernacle, there was one lampstand with seven branches; but here John saw seven lampstands (Rev. 1:12), symbolizing the seven churches addressed in chapters 2—3 (v. 20). Each local assembly of believers should shine for the Lord (Matt. 5:16) by holding fast the Word of life and proclaiming it in a dark world (Phil. 2:14–16).

According to verse 5, He is the faithful witness (the Prophet), the firstborn from the dead (the Priest), and the ruler over the kings of the earth (the King). He is also the Savior (vv. 5b–6) who has made His people a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:1—6; 1 Pet. 2:1–10). Never forget that Jesus shed His blood for you, and that His blood cleanses (1:5; 7:14), redeems (5:9), and overcomes (12:11).

When John was in the Upper Room, he leaned on Jesus' bosom (John 13:23); but when he saw the glorified Christ, he fell at His feet as a dead man (v. 17; 2 Cor. 5:16). Like John, we must begin with worship if God's revelations in this book are to have any meaning to us.

One day "there shall be no more death" (21:4) because Jesus has conquered death (v. 18). When you know Him as Savior and Lord, you need not fear the future; He has the keys in His hand.

REVELATION 2—3

Judgment begins at "the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17), so Jesus deals with the seven churches before He deals with the lost world. These churches illustrate the good and the bad in churches everywhere and in every age. If you were looking for a church to join, which of these seven would you select and why?

Ephesus (2:1–7). There is so much good in this church that we are surprised to discover they had left (not lost) their first love. The honeymoon was over (Jer. 2:2)! No amount of separation, sacrifice, or service can make up for your lack of love toward the Lord. The word *Nicolaitans* means "conquer the people." Apparently a group in the church lorded it over the people and promoted a separation of "clergy" and "laity." (See Matt. 21:20–27; 23:1–12.)

Smyrna (2:8–11). The name *Smyrna* comes from "myrrh," which is a bitter herb, a suitable name for a church facing persecution. Would the believers be *fearful* or *faithful* (v. 10)? Suffering can enrich us, even if we think we are poor; and what people think is wealth might turn out to be poverty (3:17)! What difference does it make if people slander you so long as you have the Lord's approval?

Pergamos (2:12–17). These believers held to the faith even

when it might have cost them their lives. But they were too tolerant of false doctrine and were in danger of having the Lord declare war on the church. Balaam convinced Israel to compromise with their unbelieving neighbors, disobey the Lord, and indulge in immorality (Num. 22—24). Being willing to die for the faith is no substitute for living the faith.

Thyatira (2:18–29). Verse 19 gives you the impression that all is well in the church, but keep reading! Like the saints in Pergamos, the believers in Thyatira tolerated sin in the church. Idolatry and immorality usually go together, and Jezebel personifies both (1 Kings 16:29–34; 21; 2 Kings 9:30–37). Not everybody in the fellowship was guilty of sin, and the Lord did not warn them. Instead, He encouraged them to hold to the truth and be faithful.

Sardis (3:1–6). This church had a great reputation, but close examination showed that its ministry did not live up to its name. In fact, the church was ready to die! What was the cause? Many of the people were defiling themselves by compromising with sin (2 Cor. 6:14–18; James 1:27). The "Book of Life" contains the names of all living persons; and when a person dies without Christ, the name is blotted out. Believers have their names in the Lamb's Book of Life and can never be blotted out.

Philadelphia (3:7–13). The name means "brotherly love," and Jesus had a special love for these people (v. 9). Weak as they were, they were given an open door of service; and the Lord urged them to take advantage of it. When God opens a door for you, nobody can shut it; but you can ignore or neglect it.

Laodicea (3:14–22). This church did not know how bad off it was! It was a working church, but its service was lukewarm. The members lacked spiritual enthusiasm. It was a wealthy church, but it was really poor—and did not know its own sad condition. Worst of all, the Lord was *outside the church trying to get in!* If only one member would yield to Him, the church could be changed.

God's people must be open and honest with the Lord and humbly submit to His spiritual diagnosis. No church or Christian is so far gone that He cannot bring renewal, but we must be willing to repent and return to Him.

To the Overcomers

Each of these messages to the churches ends with a promise to the overcomers. These overcomers are not an elite group in the church but true believers who have trusted Christ (1 John 5:1–5). No matter how unspiritual an assembly may become, Christ will always honor those who belong to Him if they are faithful to His Word. The promises to the overcomers follow Old Testament history, from the Garden of Eden (Rev. 2:7) to the kingdom throne (3:21).

REVELATION 4

A door (1). God will one day open the door, the trumpet will sound, and God's people will be called to heaven (1 Thess. 4:13–18). Meanwhile, we must take advantage of the open door of service that He gives us (3:8).

A throne (2, 4–5). Revelation is the book of the throne. John saw God the Father on the throne and was so overwhelmed that he had to refer to precious stones to describe what he beheld. Satan may have his throne on earth (2:13), but God's throne in heaven rules over all and will not be defeated.

A rainbow (3). This emerald rainbow was *around* the throne, a complete circle and not just an arc. It pictures the grace of God (Gen. 9:11–17). On earth, we see the rainbow *after* the storm; but John saw it *before* the storm of judgment came. God gives His people His gracious promise, and they need not fear the coming storm (3:10; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:8).

A choir (6–11). The living creatures represent creation praising the Creator (Gen. 1:28–31), and the elders represent God's people worshiping Him. When you lose the wonder of the Creator, you cease to become a good steward of the cre-

ation (11:18). All of creation praises the Lord while sinful man praises himself and ignores his Creator.

"The more I study nature, the more I am amazed at the Creator."

Louis Pasteur

"Thus does the world forget You, its Creator, and falls in love with what You have created instead of with You."

Augustine

REVELATION 5

The scroll (1) represents the title deed to creation, for Jesus Christ alone is the rightful Heir (Ps. 2:8; Heb. 1:2). Satan offered Him the whole world in return for one act of worship (Matt. 4:8–10), but Jesus won the right to receive the scroll when He gave Himself on the cross. Have you placed the scroll of your life in His hands?

The Lamb (5–6) is Jesus Christ who was slain as a sacrifice for sin (1 Pet. 1:18–20); He is both Lamb (John 1:29) and Lion (Gen. 49:8–10), the Savior and the Sovereign. He is also the Root of David, for He existed before David and brought David's kingly line into being. As Lamb, Jesus offers salvation; as Lion, He judges those who reject Him. Marvel at the many aspects of His person and work!

The incense (8) represents prayer (Ps. 141:1–3). For centuries, God's people have been praying, "Thy kingdom come"; and those prayers are about to be answered. Saints on earth do not pray to or through the saints now in heaven; our praying is to the Father and through the Son. But the prayers of God's people play a vital part in God's governing of the world.

The worship (9–14). He is worthy of our worship, not only because He is Creator (chap. 4) but even more because He is our Redeemer. See how the circle of praise grows until every creature worships Him. Heaven is a place of worship, so begin to get ready now to join in the praise!

"If the veil of the world's machinery were lifted off, how much we would find is done in answer to the prayers of God's children."

Robert Murray M'Cheyne

REVELATION 6

The world ruler (Antichrist) begins his conquest of the nations by peacefully taking control (vv. 1–2). He has a weapon but no ammunition; and men are saying, "Peace and safety!" (1 Thess. 5:1–3). Satan usually declares peace before he declares war, so beware his offers.

Counterfeit Christ

There are two important riders in Revelation: Antichrist at the opening of the book (6:1–2) and Christ at the close (19:11–16). The prefix anti *in Greek means "instead of" as well as "against." The world ruler is a counterfeit Christ, energized by the master counterfeiter, Satan (2 Cor. 11:13–15). John does not use the term* Antichrist; *instead, he calls him "the beast" (chap. 13). The world would not receive the true Christ, but it will receive the falst Christ (John 5:43).*

Soon the world is at war (vv. 3–4), and suffering results from famine and plagues (vv. 5–8) and cosmic disturbances (vv. 12–17). Jesus said these things would happen (Matt. 24:4–13).

The martyrs are seen "under the altar" because that is where the blood was placed (Lev. 4:7; 17:11). Death for Jesus' sake is not waste; it is sacrifice and worship. They pray not for personal vengeance but for God's glorification and vindication. When it appears that God is not working as you think He should, be patient and let Him do His will in His time.

"Love makes the whole difference between an execution and a martyrdom."

Evelyn Underhill

REVELATION 7

When the storm starts to get worse, John sees two groups of people and takes courage. Why? Because he realizes that God is at work even in the midst of tribulation.

God has His servants who will proclaim His message and honor His name (vv. 1–8). We are not told what these sealed Jews will do, but we assume they will point people to the Lord. Times of tribulation give opportunities for witness (Matt. 24:14).

"We make a great mistake if we connect with our conception of heaven the thought of rest from work. Rest from toil, from weariness, from exhaustion—yes; rest from work, from productiveness, from service—no. 'They serve God day and night.'"

B. F. Westcott

Apparently the 144,000 Jews will be sealed at the beginning of the Tribulation; and at the end, a great multitude of saved Gentiles will be seen (vv. 9–17). The day of the Lord will bring judgment and destruction, and it will also result in the saving of people. In wrath, God remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2). When you experience trials, ask God to use you to win others to the Savior even in the midst of troubles.

Trials do not last forever. One day, you will come out of tribulation and experience the gracious comforts of God. Wait and be faithful, and He will see you through.

REVELATION 8—9

Incense at the altar (8:1–4). The silence in heaven is the lull before the storm (Hab. 2:20; Zeph. 1:7). Even the heavenly hosts stop their worship as they contemplate the awesome judgments about to fall. But those judgments are the answer to the saints' prayers (5:8), "Thy kingdom come!" Do not stop praying!

Fire from the altar (8:5—9:12). The world will not come to the altar for forgiveness (9:21), so the altar sends forth judgment. Heaven and earth are struck as the trumpets sound, and the bottomless pit belches out demonic creatures to torment mankind. Rather than repent, people will try to commit suicide; but they will not be able to die (9:6). They will continue in their sins: occult practices, murder, immorality, and thievery (9:20–21), all of which sound very contemporary.

A voice from the altar (9:13–21). God has His legions ready to be released at the right time, and torment will be replaced by death. Men have wanted to die, so God will send His servants to do the job. One-third of mankind will be killed (9:15), which means that half of the world's population is now dead (6:8)! The world must make a choice: life or death (Deut. 30:19). Are you offering them the gift of life in Jesus Christ?

REVELATION 10

The voice of the thunders (1–4). We do not know what the angel shouted or what the seven thunders uttered (Ps. 29). God has given sufficient truth in His Word for salvation and godly living, so we must not crave to know the hidden things (Deut.

29:29). The purpose of Scripture is to save sinners and sanctify character, not satisfy curiosity.

The voice of the angel (5–7). The angel said, "There will be delay no longer!" What joy this statement will bring to the martyrs (and others) who ask, "How long?" (6:9–11). God has His times (Eccles. 3:1–8) and will accomplish His purposes on schedule. Our responsibility is to be faithful and not inquisitive (Acts 1:6–8).

The voice of the apostle (8–11). God still needed John to declare His message to the people. No angel could take his place. But to share God's message, we must take the Word, receive it inwardly like food, and let it become part of us (Jer. 15:16; Ezek. 3:1–11; 1 Thess. 2:13). The Word is sweet when you read it (Ps. 119:103) but bitter when it goes deeper and you digest it.

"If you conscientiously undertake to walk in the truth revealed, you too will know something of its bitterness. . . . We need the bitter as well as the sweet; and every soul who has walked in the truth, as God has revealed it to him, has found, at last, the blessedness of obedience."

H. A. Ironside

REVELATION 11

To measure something is to claim it for yourself, as when the new owner of a house measures it for carpets, drapes, and so forth. John claims the temple in Jerusalem for the Lord even though in a short time the Antichrist will take it over (2 Thess. 2:3–4). God may seem to lose some battles, but He will finally win the war. We walk by faith.

We do not know who the two witnesses are, but they encourage us to be faithful to the Lord in difficult times. God

protects them and then permits them to be slain (Acts 12:1–10). God's servants are immortal until their work is done. But Satan's victory is short, for God takes the two men to heaven. Satan's victory is defeat, but God's seeming defeat is victory.

No matter what the enemy may do to the temple on earth, he cannot touch the temple in heaven (v. 19). The rejoicing of evil men soon becomes lamentation (vv. 10–14), while the hosts of heaven proclaim the sovereign reign of Jesus Christ (vv. 15–18). Let the nations rage (Ps. 2): Jesus Christ will reign forever and ever!

"No doctrine in the whole Word of God has more excited the hatred of mankind than the truth of the absolute sovereignty of God. The fact that 'the Lord reigneth' is indisputable, and it is this fact that arouses the utmost opposition in the unrenewed human heart."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

REVELATION 12

The Murderer (1–6). The Child is Jesus Christ, and the woman represents Israel who brought the Savior into the world. The dragon is Satan who tried to keep Jesus from being born and attempted to kill Him after He was born. Satan wants to rule this world, and he will not submit to the King (v. 5; Ps. 2:9).

The Deceiver (7–9). This is a picture of the fall of Satan (Isa. 14:12–17). He was able to deceive one-third of the angels into following him (v. 4), and now he deceives the world into worshiping him.

The Accuser (10–12). Satan has access to God's throne where he accuses God's people (Job 1—2; Zech. 3). The Lamb overcomes him because of His victory at Calvary (Rom. 8:31–34; 1 John 2:1–2) and because of the power of the Word (Eph. 6:17).

The Persecutor (13–17). The war may be over in heaven, but it it getting more intense here on earth. Satan is angry and seeks to destroy the Jews and make war with anyone who trusts the Lord. God is able to shelter His people in spite of Satan's attacks, but be sure you wear the armor (Eph. 6:10–18) and trust the blood of Jesus.

"I'm not afraid of the devil. The devil can handle me—he's got judo I never heard of. But he can't handle the One to whom I'm joined; he can't handle the One to whom I'm united; he can't handle the One whose nature dwells in my nature."

A. W. Tozer

REVELATION 13

Worship. The beast from the sea is Satan's final and greatest masterpiece—Antichrist, who towers above all the tyrants and dictators of world history. This man accepts the offer that Satan gave to Jesus (v. 2; Matt. 4:8–10). The world worships him as a god, but heaven sees him as a beast (Dan. 7). The counterfeit Christ is now on the scene!

Warfare. The Beast fights God by speaking blasphemous words (Dan. 7:8, 11, 20, 25) and by persecuting the saints (v. 7; Dan. 7:25). It may seem strange that God should permit His people to be defeated, yet this is part of His plan (Heb. 11:35–40). In every age, God's people have had to battle some satanic beast.

Wealth. The Beast's "prime minister" leads the world to worship the Beast by controlling all the wealth. It was a matter of life or death! When you combine political power with economic power and all religion, you have a formula for controlling the whole world. But the lost world worships money and power, so the task will not be too difficult.

Which Riches Are Yours

Since all the riches of this world
May be gifts from the Devil and earthly kings,
I should suspect that I worshiped the Devil
If I thanked God for worldly things.
The countless gold of a merry heart,
The rubies and pearls of a loving eye,
The indolent never can bring to the mart,
Nor the cunning hoard up in his treasury.

William Blake

REVELATION 14

John used agricultural images to tell us that the time was ripe for judgment.

Firstfruits (1–5). God takes the best for Himself before the harvest begins. We met the 144,000 in chapter 7, God's sealed servants who come through the Tribulation and sing the praises of the Lamb. The description in verse 4 should be taken in a spiritual sense: they did not commit fornication by worshiping the Beast or his image (Exod. 34:15; James 4:4).

Wine (6–13). The "cup of wrath" is an image borrowed from Jeremiah 25:15ff. God pours out His wrath on those who follow the Beast and reject God's truth. Although verse 13 may be applied to all believers who die, it will have a special meaning to the martyrs of that evil day.

Reaping (14–20). God is allowing the seeds of sin to grow and produce a harvest (vv. 14–16). One day, the world will reap what it has sown. John also uses the grape harvest to illustrate the coming judgment (vv. 17–20). The "vine of the earth" is ripening, and one day God will apply the sickle. Meanwhile, the branches in the True Vine (John 15:1–8) should be bearing more and more fruit.

REVELATION 15

John reaches back into the Old Testament to teach us about God's judgment and grace. The seven angels have bowls of wrath, plagues to pour on a wicked world. They remind us of the plagues God sent to Egypt in the days of Moses (Exod. 7—12). Note in chapter 16 how the plagues parallel those God sent to Egypt.

God delivered Israel from Egypt, and they sang a song of victory at the Red Sea (Exod. 15). John saw the tribulation victors singing by the heavenly sea of glass. Moses and the Lamb come together in the song of triumph.

The heavenly tabernacle is filled with smoke, just as the glory of God filled both the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10–11). But the glory then was a mark of God's presence and blessing. The glory John saw was an announcement that God's wrath was about to be poured out on a wicked world.

Sinners will not learn from the past, but believers can be encouraged by the past. The God of Moses and Israel is still defending His people. There is a new song for you to sing.

REVELATION 16

No matter what the unbelieving world may say, God's judgments are righteous (vv. 1–7). Sinners reap what they sow. Because "righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne" (Ps. 97:2), nobody can accuse God of being unfair.

God's judgments do not change men's hearts (vv. 8–11). God judges sinners not to reveal His grace but to uphold His holiness. Sinners in the last days will be like Pharaoh in the days of Moses; they will harden their hearts more as God's judgments increase.

Against the dark background of judgment shines the promise of God (vv. 12–16). Christ is coming soon, and we must watch eagerly and walk carefully (3:1–6) so that we will be ready to meet Him (1 John 2:28).

God's judgment will one day be finished (vv. 17–21). God's long-suffering will finally end, and His wrath will be revealed. What holds Him back today? Read 2 Peter 3:9, 15 for the answer.

"In righteousness God reveals chiefly His love of holiness; in justice, chiefly his hatred of sin . . . Neither justice nor righteousness . . . is a matter of arbitrary will. They are revelations of the inmost nature of God."

Augustus Hopkins Strong

The Battlefield

Armageddon *(Rev. 16:16) is Hebrew for "the hill of Megiddo"; and* Megiddo *means "place of slaughter." It is the plain in the Holy Land where Barak defeated the Canaanites (Judg. 5:19) and Gideon the Midianites (Judg. 7). King Saul fought his last battle there (1 Sam. 31). One of the greatest natural battlefields in the world, it is where the Antichrist will gather the world's armies to fight against Jesus Christ (Isa. 24; Joel 3; Zech. 12—14). Revelation 19:11–21 records the outcome.*

REVELATION 17

Each person must identify with either the harlot or the bride (21:9); there can be no compromise. The woman represents the ultimate in godless world religion. She is joined with government (carried by the Beast) and corrupts everything she touches. The bride is the true church of Jesus Christ, cleansed by His blood and destined for glory.

Participating in false religion is like committing adultery: you are unfaithful to the one to whom you pledged your love (Isa. 57:3; Jer. 3:8–9; Hos. 2:4). The harlot was popular for a time, but then her "lovers" turned on her and destroyed her. The Antichrist will use a world church to get himself into power and then establish his own religion (13:11–15).

Though Christians must be good citizens and seek to influence government for the Lord, the church must not marry political systems. The systems will only use the church to promote their own plans and then abandon it. Christ's kingdom is not of this world (John 18:33–38), and the enemy is spiritual (Eph. 6:10ff.). We must use spiritual weapons (2 Cor. 10:3–6) to fight spiritual enemies.

REVELATION 18

The harlot and the bride are each identified with a city: the harlot with Babylon and the bride with heavenly Jerusalem (21:9ff.). The heavenly city will be the bride's home for eternity, but Babylon will be destroyed by God. The world's economy will be ruined.

"In our well-intentioned identification with the world, we do not mold it—it molds us. We are not to be isolated but insulated, moving in the midst of evil but untouched by it."

Vance Havner

John certainly had Rome in mind when he wrote this chapter, but his imagery means much more. Babylon symbolizes the whole godless world system that caters to the appetites of sinful men and women (1 John 2:15–17). True believers have nothing in common with the harlot and her city and should be separated from them (v. 4; Jer. 50:8; 51:6; 2 Cor. 6:14–18). In every age, the church has had to identify its Babylon and separate from it.

When God judges sinners, earth laments and heaven rejoices (v. 20). Most people are concerned primarily with satisfying their physical desires; they are not concerned about things spiritual or eternal. They live for the temporary and the immediate, not the eternal.

REVELATION 19

Celebration (1–6). Sinners cry "Alas!" but saints shout "Hallelujah!" at the fall of the godless world system called Babylon. Sin has been judged, God's servants have been vindicated, God has been glorified, and Christ is about to usher in His kingdom. Even as you anticipate these victories, by faith you can shout "Hallelujah!"

Proclamation (7–10, 17–21). Two contrasting suppers are named in this chapter: the marriage supper of the Lamb (v. 9), which brings blessing, and the "supper of the great God" (vv. 17–21), which brings judgment. The bride makes herself ready at the judgment seat of Christ where her "spots and wrinkles" are taken away (Eph. 5:25–27) and she receives rewards for faithful service. In contrast, the godless armies of earth are defeated by the Lord and become food for the birds. This is the battle of Armageddon mentioned in Revelation 16:16.

The Coming Kingdom

His kingdom is coming!
Oh, tell me the story!
God's banner exalted shall be;
The earth shall be filled with His wonder and glory,
As waters that cover the sea.

Anonymous

Revelation (11–16). The conquering Christ comes with His armies and defeats all His enemies! Contrast this with His ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21:1–11), and re-

view the Father's promises in Psalm 2. Also contrast it with the ride of the Antichrist (6:1–2). It encourages us to know that our Savior is *today* King of kings and Lord of lords, and that the future is secure because He is reigning.

REVELATION 20

The lost throne (1–3, 7–10). Since Satan's rebellion (Isa. 14:12–15), God has permitted him to work on this earth, but He has always kept him in control (Job 1—2). Satan will exchange his throne for a bottomless pit, and his final destiny will be the lake of fire where he will spend eternity with the Beast and the false prophet (v. 10; 19:20)—and with those who choose to follow Satan instead of Jesus Christ (Matt. 25:41).

The kingdom thrones (4–6). The first resurrection takes place before Jesus ushers in His kingdom and involves only those who have trusted Christ (John 5:24–29; 1 Thess. 4:13–18). They will reign with Him (Matt. 19:28) and have responsibilities commensurate with their faithful service while living on earth (Matt. 25:14–30).

The great white throne (11–15). This judgment involves only the lost and follows the second resurrection, the resurrection to condemnation. Sinners who rejected Christ will face Him (John 5:22) and hear Him say, "Depart from Me!" (Matt. 7:23; 25:41). This solemn scene ought to move us to pray for the lost and witness to them, and thank the Lord for His grace in saving us!

REVELATION 21

For those who believe in Jesus Christ, the future means "all things new" (v. 5); but for those who reject Him, it means the same old sins for all eternity (vv. 8, 27; 22:11, 15).

Human history begins with a garden (Gen. 2:8–17) and ends with a city that is like a garden. However, the most important thing about the heavenly city is not the absence of sin but the presence of God in all His glory (vv. 3, 11, 23), for His presence makes "all things new."

He is the temple (v. 22) and the light (v. 23); and His presence means there is no more sin, pain, death, sorrow, or crying (v. 4), and no more curse (22:3; Gen. 3:9–19). Heaven is so wonderful

that the only way John can describe it is to tell us what will *not* be there! Its beauties and blessings are beyond human words to describe or explain.

Why did Jesus give John this preview of eternal glory? *To encourage His people who go through testing and persecution.* "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:1–6) is the best medicine for a broken heart and the best foundation for wavering feet.

"The hope of heaven under troubles is like the wind and sails to the soul."

Samuel Rutherford

"No man ought to look for anything in heaven but what one way or another he has some experience in this life."

John Owen

REVELATION 22

How do you respond to the promise of the Lord's return? John's last chapter can help you take inventory.

Are you treasuring His Word and obeying it (v. 7)? This is *His* message to you (v. 16), and it must not be altered (vv. 18–19). There is a special blessing for the obedient (v. 14).

Are you doing the work He has called you to do (v. 12)? He promises to reward faithful servants (Luke 12:35–48).

Do you really *want* Jesus to return today (v. 20)? Do you "love His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8)? If Jesus were to come today, would you be disappointed and your plans be upset?

Are you urging lost sinners to trust Him and be ready for His coming (v. 17)? The Holy Spirit works through the church to bring lost people to the Savior. The people described in 21:8

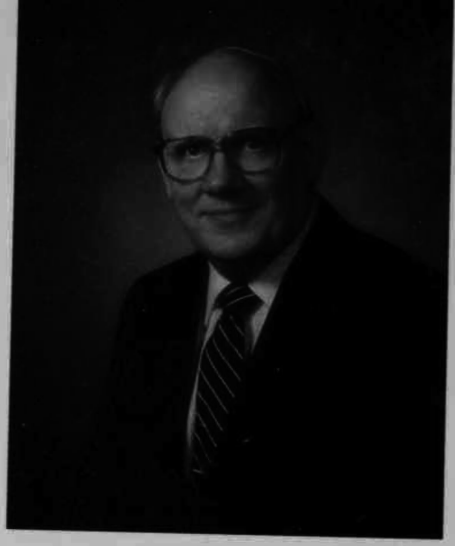
and 22:11 can be saved (1 Cor. 6:9–11) and become new creatures ready for the new heaven and earth (2 Cor. 5:17). Will you tell them?

"Amazing Grace"

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see!

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.

John Newton



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